



A Tropical Birding set departure tour

## COLORADO (USA): Chasing Chickens

7<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> April 2021



Observing dozens of displaying male **Greater Sage-Grouse** at length, performing these odd “pageants” flanked by the scenic, snow-splattered mountains of Colorado was a typical, major highlight of this tour (*Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours*).

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*Report written by Sam Woods.*

*Thanks to participants Stanley Almoney, John Kern, John Strawser, and Margaret Wang for the use of their photos from this tour in the report (individually indicated).*

**Introduction:**

Many “normal” tourists would be surprised to find out birders visit Colorado during the springtime, when ski slopes are still active, many of the summer hiking trails are yet to open, and the weather is nothing if not predictably changeable. However, we came to see the “chickens” first and foremost and this is the heady time of year when not only are these most conspicuous, during their spring displays at traditional lek sites, but also coincides with a season of transition when breeding birds and wintering species are all also in the mix. It was a very successful tour, during this 2300mile (3600km)-long road trip that spanned much of the “Centennial State”, **we got to see every possible chicken, all 13 species of them.** This included the dramatic displays of **Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens**, (photo right, John Strawser), **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, and **Greater and Gunnison Sage-Grouse**. Decent numbers of individuals (e.g., 61 Greater Sage-Grouse, 35 Lesser Prairie-Chickens) coupled with these dramatic displays from most of these were the very essence of this trip and so most were featured among the highlights of the tour. The chickens were not all easy

though, as **Dusky Grouse** and the **ptarmigan** in particular shredded some nerves, by making us wait until the very final moments to appear. At the end of the tour, when the traditional bird-of-the-tour vote was taken, two non-chickens also crept into the top five birds. **Boreal Owl** (photo next page, John Kern) was only narrowly beaten to the top spot by a late, late **White-tailed Ptarmigan** found on our final, neryv afternoon at lofty Loveland Pass. Spellbinding flocks of thousands of **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** in southeast Colorado also left an indelible mark with the group, making that final selection too.



Some of the differences this year were the insertion of a superb private ranch for **Lesser Prairie-Chickens (LPC)**, where we were able to visit several different leks of this endangered species on the land, and new Sharp-tailed Grouse lek visited due to the closure of a previous site. A diverse range of “LPC” displays were seen and perhaps led the species to ousting the not uneventful displays of **Greater Prairie-Chicken** from the top five highlights of the tour, and the **Sharp-tailed Grouse** displays were even more popular, making these new sites instantly popular choices! Away from the chickens and lek sites, we visited private mountain feeders amongst snow-dusted pines, where **Gray-crowned, Black and Brown-capped Rosy-finches** were all seen on our final morning, a drop dead gorgeous male **Evening Grosbeak** landed on another feeder one afternoon earlier on the tour, a male **Red Crossbill** stood out against the clear blue skies and recently fallen snow, and some **Steller’s Jays** provided plentiful antics all of their own. Along a waterway, we stopped in on a pair of **American Dippers** that were observed showing a range of their odd behaviors, including periodically foraging underwater. Alongside all of this, it would be a travesty not to mention how great this tour was for waterbird aficionados; more than 20 species of waterfowl were recorded, as we dropped in on many lakes, ponds and waterways, many of which were loaded with ducks, geese, and grebes, including **Barrow’s Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Redheads, Canvasbacks, Wood Ducks, Red-breasted and Hooded Mergansers, and Western, Clark’s, Horned and Eared Grebes.**



© John Kern

Shorebird numbers were lower than we’d hoped during this early spring tour, but we were still left with highlights like the much-wanted **Mountain Plover** at Chico Basin, a passing flock of **Long-billed Curlews** at Pawnee, a gorgeous foraging female **Wilson’s Phalarope**, and a **Wilson’s Snipe** that seemed to be oblivious to the fact that it was feeding in the open! This tour virtually opened with a woodpecker, with the sharp-dressed **Williamson’s Sapsucker** amongst some Ponderosa pines just outside of Denver. A couple of **Lewis’s Woodpeckers** were also readily found, and stayed for lengthy views, and a pair of **Red-naped Sapsuckers** memorably shared an Aspen stand with a male **American Three-toed Woodpecker**. Colorado was though, so much more than a collection of much wanted birds, as the striking scenery of this outdoor state loomed large in the background, notably among the red rock canyon at the Colorado National Monument, and mammals were conspicuous too, including regular **Pronghorns**, a few herds of **Elk**, two **porcupines**, and a pair of **Moose**, on a list of **20 mammals recorded**.

#### TOP FIVE BIRDS OF THE TOUR:

1. **White-tailed Ptarmigan**, Loveland Pass
2. **Boreal Owl**, near Walden
3. **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, near Craig
4. **Greater Sage-Grouse**, near Walden
5. = **Lesser Prairie-Chicken**, near Scott City (Kansas) & **Yellow-headed Blackbird** “mega flock” in southeast Colorado



This **Steller's Jay** was a popular visitor to some busy mountain feeders we visited on our first morning west of *Denver* (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

### **Tour Summary:**

**Day 1 (of birding): Genesee Park, Clear Creek, Buena Vista and Monarch Pass to Gunnison.** After a brief breakfast near the hotel, we started our game of Colorado “habitat bingo” in a spot of *Ponderosa Pines* at *Genesee Park*. Here, we were seeking a *sapsucker*, but a typically energetic party of **Pygmy Nuthatches** got in first, scurrying around a local pine, before the distinctive drumming of a **Williamson’s Sapsucker** drew us away, and led us to a wooden power pole, its chosen territorial marker for the day. Our time in the pines drew to a close after we had also studied a prospecting pair of **Western Bluebirds** at a tree cavity. Our next plan was to head up to considerably higher ground, at *Loveland Pass* (11,900ft), in search of one of the trickier trip birds, *White-tailed Ptarmigan*. However, a large hazard sign (and the Internet), revealed the pass had been shut down following a truck roll and a subsequent chemical spill. Therefore, we needed to cull our first quest for that bird, and insert a second search into the final birding day of the tour, a “flexi-day” reserved for the *Denver* area. *Loveland Pass*, and its spiritly white *ptarmigan*, instantly became the focus of the itinerary for the final birding day of the tour. Back to this day though, and we quickly switched our focus, by visiting some private, snow-bound, feeders in *Clear Creek*, which were lively with **Mountain Chickadees**, and held a scattering of **Brown-capped Rosy-Finches**, a few punk-haired **Steller’s Jays** (photo above), as well as several **Clark’s Nutcrackers**, **White-breasted Nuthatches**, and **Cassin’s Finches**. A wonderful variety of **Dark-eyed Junco** forms were also present there, including “Slate-colored”, “Oregon”, “Pink-sided” and “Gray-headed” Juncos. A handsome female **Pine Grosbeak** there too proved to be the only sighting of the tour.



This **American Dipper** near *Buena Vista* put on quite a show, foraging underwater, singing from mid-river rocks, and gathering nesting material (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

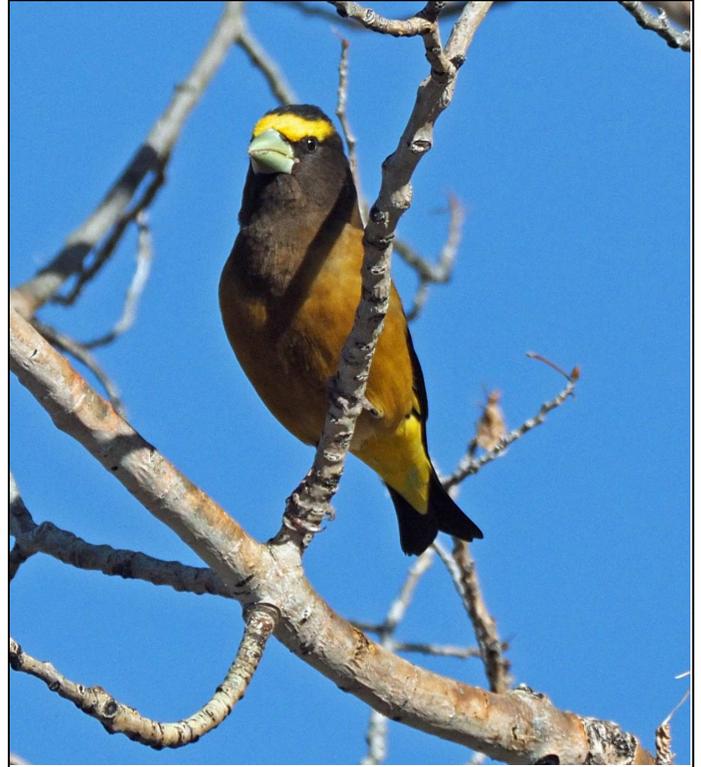
A stop in *Silverthorne* came next, resulting in us *not* finding the hoped-for *Barrow's Goldeneyes*, although the glassy waters held a smart breeding plumage **Eared Grebe** and some **Redheads** as compensation. Lunch came after at a Vietnamese



restaurant, before we headed westwards. Colorado tours are something of a road trip within themselves, requiring widespread coverage of the *Centennial State* to visit all the chicken sites. On the route west, we made several further stops, first successfully scanning a quiet neighborhood for **Lewis's Woodpeckers** (left), and then we made our first try for *Pinyon Jays*. The jays were *not* found, but a pair of **American Dippers** (above) foraging underwater, singing from the riverside, and displaying on the rocks provided plenty of entertainment there. The later breaks in montane boreal coniferous forest did not yield the hoped for *three-toed woodpeckers* before time caught up with us, and we headed into *Gunnison* ready for the first of many early "chicken" related starts to come...

**Day 2: Waunita Springs, Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Orchard City, Grand Mesa and Powderhorn to Grand Junction.** The day started out (before light) with a lengthy stop for the rarest chicken of the tour, **Gunnison Sage-Grouse**, at the only public viewing site available for this endangered species. Five male grouse were seen by 'scope as they displayed on a distant ridgetop, spreading their spiny tails, puffing out their chests, and parading around in a fashion that is uniquely "sage-grouse"! The morning was predictably chilly, and a late, hot, breakfast, was therefore very welcome following the early morning displays of the grouse.

From there, this Colorado "road trip", moved west towards *Grand Junction*, where we spent the night. However, (like all of the days on the tour), all the drives were punctuated by plentiful birding stops, carefully selected from the myriad birding sites present in Colorado. The first post-breakfast stop was at the dramatically scenic *Black Canyon of the Gunnison*, where we bumped into a **Gambel's Quail** on the way there, standing sentry on a fencepost. We were not visiting the *Black Canyon* for its scenery, but for another *chicken*, although the scenery was a wonderful byproduct of our trip there. That was just as well, as the chicken we were after, *Dusky Grouse*, had been notoriously difficult this year, and so it proved for us too, with no sight nor sound following a survey of its regular haunts. We left with no grouse but added "Slate-colored" **Fox Sparrow** and **Spotted Towhee** to the bird list before we departed. Our next birding stop was near *Orchard City*, where a cooperative **Rock Wren** posed for photos, and a nearby reservoir held a good selection of waterbirds, including a pair of stately **Sandhill Cranes**, and an unexpected rarity, in the form of a single **Mexican Duck**.



From there we moved up into boreal coniferous forests again, this time at *Grand Mesa*, where our recent spot for *American Three-toed Woodpecker* proved wasteful, in terms of time, until *Peggy* found us a pair of **Canada Jays**. Moving lower into a large stand of *Aspen* trees, we paused for one of the classic denizens of this forest type, **Red-naped Sapsucker**, a pair of which were lit up by the bright afternoon sun. As we were preparing to leave, *Ben* picked up a significant drum in the background, which proved to be exactly what he had hoped it was, a last ditch, **American Three-toed Woodpecker**, which eventually made its way to some roadside trees. Our last major stop of the day was in the ski town of *Powderhorn*, where the resonant sounds of **Red-winged Blackbirds** led us to a few neighborhood feeders, which were well attended in the late afternoon. **Steller's Jays** came and went regularly, as did **Dark-eyed Juncos** and **Cassin's Finches**, while **Mountain and Black-capped Chickadees** fed side-by-side. However, the "stop-the-press" moment of the afternoon occurred when a male **Evening Grosbeak** (*photo above, Margaret Wang*), dropped on to a feeder right in front of us, much to *Ellen's* delight in particular; (this featured as one of her favorite birds of the trip). Ironically, the *grosbeak* was NOT our primary avian reason for being there. That species took considerably more time to pinpoint, but finally, we found a single **Black Rosy-Finch** perched conspicuously nearby to end our day in style. After that, we made our way to *Grand Junction* for the night via another "chicken" in the form of some roadside **Wild Turkeys**.

### Day 3: Cameo, Grand Valley Audubon Nature Preserve, Colorado National Monument, Highline Lake State Park, and the Utah Borderlands, to Craig.

Our day started just to the east of *Grand Junction*, among rocky red boulder-strewn slopes near *Cameo*, where we had a singular target in mind. A quick listen resulted in the bird being quickly heard, and better still we watched as one of a pair of **Chukar** (photo left Margaret Wang), hopped on to a rock for some good 'scope looks in the early morning light.



This was an ABA lifer for many of the group, and one they had requested at the outset of the tour, so was particularly pleasing to get so easily. In the same, Arizona-like, canyon, a gorgeous **Black-throated Sparrow** (photo next page) sung from some nearby sage. We returned to nearby *Grand Junction* and visited the *Grand Valley Audubon Nature Preserve/Connected Lakes State Park* area afterwards, where we quickly noted a **Gambel's Quail** as we drove in and spotted a handsome pair of **Wood Ducks** in the river. However, our first visit to an owl box revealed no owl, which was presumably waiting for a bit of sun to show itself at its cavity. We returned later, (after picking up **Cinnamon Teal** resting on a local pond, and several **Belted Kingfishers** rattling alongside), to find the **Western Screech-Owl** (photo below Margaret Wang), sunning itself once the sun had changed its position. **Bushtit** (photo next page) also featured there too, which was our cue to leave the site

and head further west. Not long out of *Grand Junction* came one of the most spectacular stops of the tour, at the wonderful red rock landscapes at the *Colorado National Monument*. The sandstone and granite-gneiss-schist rock formations on site were nothing short of jaw-dropping. These scenic rocky slopes are studded with *junipers* and *pinyon pines*, which provided critical habitat for two of the specialties on site... We soon emerged from the tour van for a singing *Juniper Titmouse*, but were quickly sidetracked by a small, mobile party of **Pinyon Jays**, which dropped out of their favored pines, hopped around on the burnt orange rocks, and then disappeared over the canyon edge.

We then returned our attentions to **Juniper Titmouse**, which sung from its own special tree. Overhead, some recently arrived **White-throated Swifts** soared beside the cliffs, and even were seen prospecting nesting cracks within the canyon walls. A single **Bighorn Sheep** spotted there was our lone sighting of the tour. The final notable bird there was the appropriately named **Canyon Wren** singing from some of the stunted trees that stud the canyon.





**Black-throated Sparrow** and **Bushtit** both featured near *Grand Junction* (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).





The birding was accompanied by some of Colorado's famous landscapes, like these at the [Colorado National Monument](#). Among these scenes we found *Juniper Titmouse*, *Pinyon Jay*, and *White-throated Swift* (TOP by Stanley Almoney; BOTTOM by Margaret Wang).



In spite of the gripping scenery, we had “appointments” with other notable species to the west, and we continued in that direction, pausing at *Highline Lake State Park*, where **Buffleheads**, **Western Grebes**, **Franklin’s Gulls** and our first **American Avocets** highlighted a decent day for waterbirds. Further west, a road that ran right along the border of Colorado and Utah, led us to a popular pair of **Sagebrush Sparrow** on the Utah side, before time pulled us north to *Craig* for the night...



**Day 4: Craig to Walden. Arapaho NWR, Walden Reservoir, and State Forest State Park.** This was unquestionably one of the highlight days of the tour. There are always tour days that set themselves apart from others and this one did it by virtue of two fantastic bookends to the day...The day started out with a pre-dawn arrival at a grouse lek (display ground), and this one is arguably one of the most absorbing displays of them all, often described as a “chicken ballet”. The **Sharp-tailed Grouse** (*photo above*) got going early, and spun and drummed their feet around us, as we watched on in awe. In the background **Western Meadowlarks** sang, and **Pronghorns** antelopes passed by. Here and there, a ringtail **Northern Harrier** took to the air, but it did not bother the grouse, whose attentions seemed singularly focused on their springtime displays. After several hours with the grouse, we had coffees and snacks with the landowner. The urbanites amongst us enjoyed this rancher’s tales of rural life, and his tidbits about the local grouse, which were clearly a deep passion of his. While we talked, a **Say’s Phoebe** rested on his balcony. On leaving, we passed through pinyon pine country, and came upon a substantial group of **Pinyon Jays**, to the relief of *Skip*, for which this was a much-wanted bird. *Ben*’s role also switched to *rescuer*, when a **Mountain Bluebird** was noticed trapped inside an abandoned trailer. *Ben* set this neon blue bird free, and we also got to photograph that morning too. We made a successful stop along the highway near *Craig* for another sagebrush species that had eluded us the day before (**Sage Thrasher**), which eventually sat still on a branch for prolonged ‘scope views and more.

From there, we set off for another *chicken* encounter east of *Craig*, although combing a county road for them was fruitless as the roadsides were utterly devoid of displaying *Dusky Grouse*. Thus, we turned our attentions to the air, where a pair of **Rough-legged Hawks** soared low and took dramatic exception to a local **Swainson's Hawk** wandering into "their" airspace. Some dancing, roadside, **Sandhill Cranes** were also appreciated on a tour rich in bird behavior. Time came, after a brief stint stuck in the mud, to leave the site without our desired chicken, but fate had other ideas...On the way out, a male **Dusky Grouse** (*photo below*) was spotted sitting in an area of short brush; he never displayed, but he did show in the open for some time, to much relief all round. This was our very final period of our final try for this species. We cut it fine to say the least! After a scant breakfast we went heavy on lunch, stopping in a wonderful café in the ski town of *Steamboat Springs*, where the homemade dessert pies were a favorite.



Last Minute Save: This **Dusky Grouse** was found during our *final*, final attempt east of *Craig* (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

We continued east to *Walden* in the afternoon, where instead of checking in, we stopped off at two wetland sites on the edge of town on our arrival, first *Arapahoe NWR*, then *Walden Reservoir*. **White-tailed Prairie-Dogs** were prominent on the ground, while some of the ponds were packed with waterbirds, most notably among them were a small party of **Barrow's Goldeneyes**, several **Canvasbacks**, some conspicuous **American White Pelicans**, and a small group of both **Eared and Clark's Grebes**. It was another good day for waterfowl, with 17 species surpassing even the day before's total. *Ben* also put us on a **Wilson's Snipe** feeding in the open, one of precious few *shorebirds* on the tour this year! We then opted for an early dinner in wonderful *Walden*, with a late period of birding planned for afterwards. After a hearty spread, we all bundled up for higher altitudes still, and headed out of town in the direction of nearby *State Forest State Park*, stopping for two large shapes on the roadside, which proved to be a pair of **Moose**. It had been a good day for mammals, with **Elk** and the "antelopes" also seen earlier.

A visit to a feeder site was perhaps too late in the day for the best activity, with only spritely *Ben* (first out of the car), getting to see a male **Pine Grosbeak** there, which had been our primary target there! Our reason for the late finish, (and early dinner), was a requested species for much of the group. It was an optional late finish, with an offer a warm bed and earlier night shunned by all for the opportunity of this scarce owl. We waited, impatiently, for darkness to fall, in an area of tall coniferous forest, with a bed of snow lying underneath. All were dressed up for the chill of night and set off along the road for our “prey”. Soon after dark we heard it, **Boreal Owl**, but all of us knew that was merely a part of the battle involved in *seeing* one. We approached the sound, and tried to see if it would come in. The bird then fell deafeningly silent, and fear spread that it was not keen after all. We changed position, and then, suddenly it called close. So close in fact that we were confident enough to spotlight the tree beside us for it. It took only seconds before *Ben* quietly declared he had the bird, and following a rapid repositioning to join him, we were all ogling, and excitedly photographing, the owl. After it took flight, we gladly returned to the van, then the warmth of *Walden*, for the night, triumphant!



Walden was very fruitful for us, 61 Greater Sage-Grouse and a Boreal Owl, being the highlights (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

**Day 5: Walden, Windy Gap Reservoir, Chico Basin Ranch, and Pueblo to La Junta.** It is easy to ask, “How do you follow a day that started out with the ballet of *Sharp-tailed Grouse* and ended with a *Boreal Owl*?” With **Greater Sage-Grouse** (photo above) is the clarion answer! For the second consecutive day, daylight opened with one of Colorado’s greatest sites, chickens on display, and particularly dramatic ones at that. We were treated to it all on this day, some 61 or more **Greater Sage-Grouse** were present, with a frenzied huddle of females surrounding the alpha male grouse, even culminating in several copulations being witnessed. Meanwhile, continuously for hours, the dozens of males present did their grotesque, bizarre, and utterly spellbinding displays. It was easy to forget the cold of dawn in highland Colorado with all the action around us!

Some males even casually wandered into the road behind us at times, visible via the van wing mirror. The photographers among us were spoiled, and so were the “observers”, too. *Ellen* spent time watching the intimate action of the biggest cluster of grouse and appreciated every minute of that through the scope, while others largely spent time photographing the much nearer, roadside, males at considerably closer range. All were satiated.



Just south of *Walden* an area of highland pines held a confiding group of **Red Crossbills** observed foraging up close, and in song from the top of the surrounding pines (*Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours*).

After the rigors of shooting grouse during a cold Colorado morning in *North Park*, a hearty breakfast in the *Mad Moose Café* was welcome indeed. A long drive followed, broken first by an impromptu pause for some roadside **Red Crossbills** (*photo above*), followed by a short stop at *Windy Gap Reservoir* on the way, where several more **Barrow's Goldeneyes**, pelicans and **Franklin's Gulls** were found amongst yet another large throng of waterbirds.

Further south, and after lunch, we stopped off at *Chico Basin*, where our first check of a very recent *Mountain Plover* nesting site came up blank, although some local birders did put us on to our first **Burrowing Owls** of the tour among the burrows of the local **Black-tailed Prairie-Dogs**. A **Canyon Towhee** flew onto the bird list not far from there but was rather spoiled by some local homeowners getting offended by our perfectly acceptable and legal presence on a public road in sight of their home. We left soon after. Investigating some woodlots on the ranch led us to a **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**, with another later sat more impressively atop a flowering *Cholla Cactus*. *Ellen* also stepped in with a fine contribution, pointing out a **North American Porcupine** sleeping above.

A distant calling *Scaled Quail* never appeared, and our searches of the cactus stands did not yield the hoped-for *Curve-billed Thrasher*, and so we cut our losses and returned to the **Mountain Plover** site, where after some brief scans we found a single bird “tip-feeding” as plovers characteristically do. Our final birding stop on another day of “habitat bingo”, was at a rather unremarkable site in *Pueblo*, which had remarkable birds all the same. Searching some backyards, we stumbled into a pair of **Curve-billed Thrashers** at last, and another **Canyon Towhee**, before a **Scaled Quail** (*photo below*), hopped up on to a wall and joined a group of eight or so birds in the local covey to close out another wonderful Colorado day. The rather local **White-winged Dove** was also found in the same area too.



A covey of **Scaled Quail** made the trip into the outskirts of the city of *Pueblo* very worthwhile. The same site also yielded *Canyon Towhee* and *Curve-billed Thrasher* (*Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours*).

**Day 6: Higbee Valley and John Martin Reservoir State Park to Scott City (Kansas).** This was one of the quieter days of the tour, but not without highlights of course, as we made our way out from southeast *Colorado* to *Kansas*, the recent stronghold for the *Lesser Prairie-Chicken*. However, that species would have to wait until the following day. We started out in rocky country along the *Higbee Valley Road*, where we were on the hunt for *sparrows*. It took some time, but eventually a **Rufous-crowned Sparrow**, a highly local bird in *Colorado*, came out in the open for all. **Canyon Towhee** also put in its third and final appearance of the tour there too. From there, we headed east, picking up some roadside **Brewer's and Vesper Sparrows** and a nesting pair of **Great Horned Owls**, before making a prolonged stop in *John Martin Reservoir State Park*. The largest body of water there held plentiful **Eared Grebes**, while a small pond inside the same park was packed with waterbirds, including a smashing **Horned Grebe** close in.

The edges held some shorebirds, which had been woefully absent on this tour until then; **Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers**, **Long-billed Dowitcher**, and a gorgeous female **Wilson's Phalarope** were all new there. **Buffleheads**, **Redheads**, **Ruddy Ducks**, and **Blue-winged Teals** were in the surrounding waters there, among many others. As we moved towards *Kansas* a roadside stop was demanded when large swirls of **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** (*photo below John Kern*), took to the air, right beside the van. We pulled over to realize there were literally thousands of these birds present, attracted to a large feeding lot on a cattle ranch. The spectacle of so many *Yellow-headed Blackbirds* was memorable and made it into the top five birds of the trip as a result. The fun continued when we crossed the *Kansas* state line, where some in the group immediately started building a *Kansas* bird list, during their first foray into the state. Birds like the abundant **Red-tailed Hawks**, **Western Meadowlarks**, and **Loggerhead Shrikes** suddenly took on a whole new meaning at that time! We settled into a hotel in *Kansas's Scott City*, ready for another early morning adventure with chickens, this time another endangered one...



Thousands of **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** in the air at one time, was a highlight in *Southeast Colorado* (*John Kern*).

**Day 7: Lake Scott State Park, and St. Francis (all Kansas), to Wray (Colorado).** Dawn saw us accompanied by both the wonderful local rancher *Stacy*, and a chorus of *Lesser Prairie-Chickens* on his vast private cattle ranch. Most of us used an old school bus as a blind, while *John and Ben* headed into a small blind at another lek on the property. Both leks held plentiful **Lesser Prairie-Chickens** (*photo next page Margaret Wang*), which were showing a good range of courting behaviors at both display grounds, with more than thirty present at each site. The odd “booming” call at one lek revealed a **hybrid Greater x Lesser Prairie-Chicken** amongst the gurgling, hyper-active, *Lessers*. The displays were gripping, and considerably faster paced compared with the labored moves of the *sage-grouse* seen in recent days. In spite of a cold morning, what with a storm brewing, we were gripped with the action.

After taking in multiple angles and pictures, we moved around the ranch, to get upgraded looks at several **Burrowing Owls**, and were even taken to a distant, and shy **Ferruginous Hawk** on a local nest, before we needed to set off back north for *Colorado*. The drive north took us right past *Lake Scott State Park*, one of the best birding sites in the region, and so we spent some time there too. **Northern Cardinals** by the visitor center were our only ones seen on the tour.



Laybys along the lake edge were regular stopping points and yielded a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** swiftly picked up by *Skip* on call, a single **Belted Kingfisher**, a series of migrant **Townsend's Solitaires**, a single **Merlin** for *Ben and John S.* only, a fidgety flock of migrant **Cedar Waxwings**, a small party of floating **Buffleheads** among the other ducks and grebes present, as well as a **Marsh Wren** in a reedbed, and our only

warblers of the tour, in the form of a couple of "Audubon's" **Yellow-rumped Warblers** at one of the final pull overs. After that productive spot, we needed to get some miles under our belt, but still found time to stop in *Goodland*, a *Kansas* town famed for its extremely bad weather (it was idyllic during our pause), and the World's largest easel. As we headed north, we made one final stop before returning into *Colorado*, taking a river walk near *St. Francis*, where about a dozen **Wood Ducks**, along with a **Red-bellied Woodpecker** featured. *John S.* had lingered with *Ben* instead of joining the rest of us for the walk and was rewarded with a **Lesser Goldfinch**.

Near the close of the day, we met with one an iconic rancher in the region, *Bob Bledsoe*, whose legendary speeches have been entertaining birders for years. He informed us of the detailed workings of his ranch, his local hunt for dinosaur remains, and critically where to set up our blinds for the *Greater Prairie-Chickens*! On the way out to the lek in the late afternoon, we spotted a female **Great Horned Owl** tucked into a hollow nesting cavity, a pair of **Burrowing Owls** at ground level, and also managed to track down some much wanted, though elusive, **Ring-necked Pheasants**. We also had our first views of **Greater Prairie-Chickens**, but quickly left them be, as we were due to return there the next day for the "full morning show". That night we enjoyed a magnificent steak at a well-hidden local steakhouse, where we bumped into the local rancher once more.

**Day 8: Wray, Pawnee National Grassland and Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR to Denver.** Our penultimate day saw us at the final lek area for *chickens* of the tour, on this day a spot for **Greater Prairie-Chickens** (*photo next page*). Their booms were heard on arrival and we hurried into position to watch them over a cold but thrilling few hours. Around twenty birds were present, predominately males, which seemed oblivious to a particularly chilled dawn. We again saw both **Great Horned and Burrowing Owls**, although all hail to *Skip* in particular who put us all on to a small party of **Northern Bobwhites**, which we viewed from the welcome warmth of the vehicle.



Impending, inclement weather did not keep the **Greater Prairie-Chickens** from doing their age-old courting rituals at *Wray* in northeast Colorado (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

Springtime in North America is about change, and springtime birding in Colorado is often accompanied by extremely changeable weather. Impending bad weather had been looming on the radar for days and today it conspicuously arrived, particularly after we had left the *prairie-chickens* behind and visited *Pawnee National Grassland*, with *longspurs* on our minds. Rain/snow and frigid weather had well and truly arrived, having us even reconsider whether we should stop in this open prairie area at all, where we would be brutality exposed to the full force of the heightened winds. It was challenging, so we used the van as a retreat, and wind break, to help while we scanned the local fields for life. One field was alive with around 450 *longspurs*, 448 of which appeared to be **McCowan's Longspurs**, with just two **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** seen after some effort sifting through this nervy flock, which would take to the air and resettle and reorder on a regular basis. A drive around the prairie did not produce much, but *Ben* made it count, with first a female **Merlin** seen from the van by all, and then a flock of ten **Long-billed Curlews** likewise. A toilet stop there also produced our only, lonely, **Blue Jay** of the tour. Our final stop of the day came at *Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR* on the northeast side of *Denver*. By the time of our arrival few wanted to venture out of the van in bone-chilling, snowy conditions, although those that did, got to see both **Hooded and Red-breasted Mergansers** amongst another good waterbird spread that also included **Clark's, Western and Eared Grebes**. With snow falling and *Denver* on weather alerts, our planned search for nighttime *saw-whet owl* was swiftly abandoned in favor of a long *Bison* dinner. That particular dinner also needed to be delayed until the final night, due to long queues, as we plotted one final day of the tour more...



A late snowfall "rearranged" the rosy-finches west of Denver and led us to finally see all three species together on our final morning within a flock of 150+ birds. The **Brown-capped Rosy-Finch** has the most restricted range, almost confined to Colorado (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

**Day 9: Silverthorne and Loveland Pass.** The final day of this birding tour is always set aside to chase whatever is needed in and around Denver. Sometimes this requires some deliberations on where best to focus, although *not* this year. The chemical spill closing the Loveland Pass on day one had made our objective crystal clear; get to the pass and find our final chicken of the tour, the clean, white *ptarmigan*. Quests for this bird are often thwarted by the weather at this high-altitude site, and this day was no different. A steady snow had fallen overnight in lower lying Denver, and we feared this may impact our only possible search for the *White-tailed Ptarmigan*. With this in mind, we opted to go beyond the pass and visit a feeder area in Silverthorne first. The idea being that we would be better informed of the road conditions to the pass, by trying later in the day for the *ptarmigan*. That bird can also be seen at any time of the day, thus not requiring a dawn vigil like some of the chickens. *Rosy-finches* this year had been changeable, flocks suddenly disappearing before the tour, when warmer weather had prevailed. Thus, by this stage, we had seen only a handful of *Brown-capped Rosy-Finches*, just a single *Black Rosy-Finch*, and no *Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches* at all. One pleasant byproduct of the harsher weather though was to shift the local *rosy-finches* around again, with larger flocks returning to feeder sites west of Denver the day before as a result. Stopping in Silverthorne we quickly located a large flock of *rosy-finches* and jumped out of the vehicle to sort through them. The majority (some 150 birds) were **Brown-capped Rosy-Finches** (photo above) and we enjoyed watching them in the snow. Then, a single **Black Rosy-Finch** suddenly showed up, improving our previous looks at the species on this tour.

The *rosy-finches* were a bundle of nervous energy, flying in and dropping into feeders, or resting in snow laden pines, and then taking off at a moment's notice. Searching through them, Peggy finally spotted a **Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch** among them, and by the end of a wonderful time there, we had totaled up four different *Gray-crowned* of the *Hepburn's* variety and *Gray-crowned* form too. The feeder activity drew the attention of other local birds too, like **Pygmy Nuthatches** (photo below), **Red Crossbill**, **Cassin's Finches**, **Steller's Jays**, and **Clark's Nutcracker**, while a **Band-tailed Pigeon** perched nearby was the lone sighting of this species on the tour.



Feeders in *Silverthorne* were very active with birds on our final morning, following overnight snow, with *Black*, *Gray-crowned* and *Brown-capped Rosy-Finches* present, along with **Pygmy Nuthatches**, *Mountain Chickadees*, *Steller's Jays* and *Red Crossbills* (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

Our arrival in *Silverthorne* had been delayed by the deteriorating traffic conditions caused by the overnight snowfall, and a quirky sound in the tour bus, which needed to be fixed and checked before we got to the more challenging road conditions at higher elevations. What this all meant was that by the time we had soaked up the *finches* lunchtime had already rolled around, and we took it in a wonderful local café, where the heavy desserts were, once again, a group favorite. After lunch we became swiftly focused, as we had heard that the road to *Loveland Pass* was open, and found it largely ice free by the afternoon timing of our visit. The conditions seemed idyllic, with low winds and the recent snowfalls having ended. Now, all we needed to do was spot a pure white bird (*White-tailed Ptarmigan*) sitting amongst the freshly fallen, pure white, snow! Everyone was game, and so we tried a trail where *Ben* and *Sam* had seen it recently. However, the rocks and vegetation that it had frequented were now under snow and our physical exertions to make this short distance at altitude went *unrewarded*. The next forays were reserved for the keen (*Peggy*, *Sam* and *Ben*) only, while others (sensibly) waited it out in the van.

These searches also proved frustrating. Three hours passed and we were still ptarmigan-less. Finally, we tried a spot further down that we had not yet searched, where the chattering calls of a **White-tailed Ptarmigan** (photos right Margaret Wang) were finally heard, and the bird gave some great views as it made trails as it walked within the fresh snow and moved from slope to slope. *John K.* quickly announced this was his "bird-of-the-trip"!

And so it proved; that night it won the bird-of-the-trip vote, only narrowly beating a certain *Boreal Owl* to top position! It has been a wonderful week or so, with almost all of the main targets being found, and excellent views of most of the chicken displays witnessed. The trip was also diverse for birds, **with 170 bird species seen and 20 mammals** on top of that too, once again proving what a gripping springtime destination Colorado truly is. That night bison was on the menu and was enjoyed by many!





Our final afternoon was spent among the freshly fallen snow at **Loveland Pass**, where the bird of the trip was found later, White-tailed Ptarmigan. Before the snows came in, our penultimate day was spent in company with displaying **Greater Prairie-Chickens** (both **Sam Woods**)



## CHECKLISTS

The taxonomy of the bird list follows: Clements, James F., White, Anthony W., and Fitzpatrick, John W. The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World. Cornell, 2007.

*This list is up to date with the major changes published by Cornell up until August 2019 (the last update before this tour).*

**H** indicates a species that was HEARD, but not seen.

**GO** indicates a species recorded by the GUIDE ONLY.

-All sites mentioned in the text within the list are in *Colorado*, unless otherwise stated-

## BIRDS:

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

**Canada Goose** *Branta canadensis*: Commonly encountered throughout the tour, *recorded almost daily*.

**Wood Duck** *Aix sponsa*: *Recorded on two days, once around Grand Junction, and again in northwest Kansas.*

**Gadwall** *Anas strepera*: Large numbers were found at various sites; *recorded on 6 tour days.*

Odontophoridae (New World Quail)

**Scaled Quail** *Callipepla squamata*: A covey of 8 birds was seen well near *Pueblo*.

**Gambel's Quail** *Callipepla gambelii*: *Two chance sightings, 1 at Black Canyon of the Gunnison, and another in Grand Junction.*

**Northern Bobwhite** *Colinus virginianus*: Thanks to *Ben* and *Skip*, 3 birds were seen well on a private ranch in *Wray*.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**Chukar** *Alectoris chukar*: A delightful early morning pair was seen at *Coal Gulch*, just east of *Grand Junction*.

**Ring-necked Pheasant** *Phasianus colchicus*: 4 were seen on a cattle ranch in *Wray*.

**Greater Sage-Grouse** *Centrocercus urophasianus*: A minimum of 61 birds were seen at a single site in North Park near *Walden*. An amazing performance was accompanied on this day by observations of copulations, and females fighting when clustered around the leading males on the lek. Came in at number 3 on the bird-of-the-tour vote.

**Gunnison Sage-Grouse** *Centrocercus minimus*: One of "Colorado's Big Five", this species was seen fairly distantly (around one kilometer away) at the only public viewing area for this endangered species, near *Gunnison*, where at least 5 displaying males were strutting along a ridgetop.

**White-tailed Ptarmigan** *Lagopus leucura*: A chemical truck spill stopping us visiting *Loveland Pass* on the first day, and then a four hour long search for it there on the final day, quickly elevated its status to near mythical on this tour. Thus, when it finally appeared its status as the "bird-of-the-tour" was quickly confirmed, with *John K.* stating it as his tour favorite before we'd even returned to the vehicle, immediately after this sighting. **BIRD-OF-THE-TOUR.**

**Dusky Grouse** *Dendragapus obscurus*: The one that very nearly got away, a single male was found in *Routt County, Colorado*.

**Sharp-tailed Grouse** *Tympanuchus phasianellus*: The most athletic and agile of "Colorado's Big Five", its unique ballet display was enjoyed near *Craig*, where about 25 birds were present during our visit.

**Greater Prairie-Chicken** *Tympanuchus cupido*: In spite of the recently arrived cold weather, some 20+ birds were seen at a traditional display site, on a large cattle ranch close to *Wray*.

**Lesser Prairie-Chicken** *Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*: This hyperactive chicken, with its energetic displays, was seen on a private ranch in *Kansas*, where around 35 birds were present. This species had undergone a significant decrease in the fifty years leading up to 2016, when studies showed that the population may be stabilizing following conservation measures, and discovery of larger populations at some locations, like this one visited on the tour. In spite of this, it has become very hard to find now in *Colorado*, hence our trip into neighboring *Kansas*!

**Wild Turkey** *Meleagris gallopavo*: Recorded on at least four tour days.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

**Pied-billed Grebe** *Podilymbus podiceps*: Singles were seen at *Fruitgrower's Reservoir* and in *Grand Junction*.

**Horned Grebe** *Podiceps auratus*: A single gorgeous breeding plumage male was seen in *John Martin Reservoir State Park*.

**Western Grebe** *Aechmophorus occidentalis*: Seen at *Highline State Park, John Martin Reservoir* and *Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR*.

**Clark's Grebe** *Aechmophorus clarkia*: Two birds were seen on *Walden Reservoir* and at *Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR*.

#### [Columbidae \(Pigeons and Doves\)](#)

**Rock Pigeon** *Columba livia*: Noted daily.

**Band-tailed Pigeon** *Patagioenas fasciata*: A single bird was seen in *Silverthorne*.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto*: Regularly recorded throughout.

**White-winged Dove** *Zenaida asiatica*: One was found in a local garden in *Pueblo*.

**Mourning Dove** *Zenaida macroura*: Regularly encountered throughout the tour.

#### [Apodidae \(Swifts\)](#)

**White-throated Swift** *Aeronautes saxatalis*: Around 30 birds were seen at the dramatic *Colorado National Monument*.

#### [Rallidae \(Rails, Gallinules, and Coots\)](#)

**American Coot** *Fulica americana*: Recorded on 7 days of the tour.

#### [Gruidae \(Cranes\)](#)

**Sandhill Crane** *Grus canadensis*: A pair at *Fruitgrower's Reservoir*, and another 4 were seen in *Routt County east of Craig*.

#### [Recurvirostridae \(Stilts and Avocets\)](#)

**Black-necked Stilt** *Himantopus mexicanus*: 3 were seen at *John Martin Reservoir State Park*.

**American Avocet** *Recurvirostra americana*: Recorded on 3 days of the tour (16 at *Highline State Park* was the biggest group).

#### [Charadriidae \(Plovers and Lapwings\)](#)

**Killdeer** *Charadrius vociferus*: Recorded on 5 days of the tour.

**Mountain Plover** *Charadrius montanus*: A single bird was located at *Chico Basin Ranch*.

#### [Scolopacidae \(Sandpipers and Allies\)](#)

**Greater Yellowlegs** *Tringa melanoleuca*: 4 were seen at *Walden Reservoir*.

**Lesser Yellowlegs** *Tringa flavipes*: Several birds were noted at *John Martin Reservoir State Park*.

**Long-billed Curlew** *Numenius americanus*: A group of 10 birds flew languidly across the road at *Pawnee National Grassland*.

**Least Sandpiper** *Calidris minutilla*: A single bird was seen in *John Martin Reservoir State Park*.

**Semipalmated Sandpiper** *Calidris pusilla*: A lone bird was seen at close range in *John Martin Reservoir State Park*.

**Long-billed Dowitcher** *Limnodromus scolopaceus*: One bird was foraging on a small pond in *John Martin Reservoir State Park*.

**Wilson's Snipe** *Gallinago delicata*: Ben spotted one feeding in the open at *Arapaho NWR, near Walden*.

**Wilson's Phalarope** *Phalaropus tricolor*: 2 birds were watched at *John Martin Reservoir State Park*, including a bright female.

#### [Laridae \(Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers\)](#)

**Franklin's Gull** *Leucophaeus pipixcan*: Recorded at 3 sites, *Highline State Park*, *Windy Gap Reservoir*, and at *Lake Scott in Kansas*.

**Ring-billed Gull** *Larus delawarensis*: Recorded at a couple of wetlands, including *Highline State Park*.

**California Gull** *Larus californicus*: Particularly prominent on *Walden Reservoir* were hundreds were present.

#### [Phalacrocoracidae \(Cormorants and Shags\)](#)

**Double-crested Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax auratus*: Recorded on a variety of wetlands, seen on 6 different tour days.

#### [Pelecanidae \(Pelicans\)](#)

**American White Pelican** *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*: 50+ on *Walden Reservoir*; others at *Windy Gap and John Martin Reservoirs*.

#### [Ardeidae \(Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns\)](#)

**Great Blue Heron** *Ardea Herodias*: A few were seen on all but a few days of the tour.

#### [Cathartidae \(New World Vultures\)](#)

**Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura*: Seen regularly away from the higher mountain sites.

#### [Pandionidae \(Osprey\)](#)

**Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus*: Recorded on 5 days of the tour.

#### [Accipitridae \(Hawks, Eagles, and Kites\)](#)

**Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos*: This popular, large, raptor was seen on at least 3 tour days.

**Northern Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*: Singles were seen on at least 5 tour days, including during our short time in *Kansas*.

**Sharp-shinned Hawk** *Accipiter striatus*: Just two singles were seen, 1 at *Highline State Park*, and another in *Kansas*.

**Cooper's Hawk** *Accipiter cooperii*: At least three different birds featured, in *Chico Basin Ranch and Wray*, and *Scott City, Kansas*.

**Bald Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*: Scattered singles were seen, and 4 were resting on an icy lake on the way to *Walden*.

**Swainson's Hawk** *Buteo swainsoni*: Singles on 5 days, including one in mid-air battle with a pair of *Rough-legged Hawks*.

**Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis*: Multiple birds were seen each day.

**Rough-legged Hawk** *Buteo lagopus*: 3 were seen along a county road in Routt, including a pair that spectacularly swooped at a local *Swainson's Hawk* that had strayed into their airspace.

**Ferruginous Hawk** *Buteo regalis*: Always scarce, and much wanted. Stacy took us to see a shy nesting bird on his Kansas ranch.

#### [Strigidae \(Owls\)](#)

**Western Screech-Owl** *Megascops kennicottii*: A nesting bird in *Grand Junction* was our first ever sighting on this tour of the species.

**Great Horned Owl** *Bubo virginianus*: Two nesting pairs were seen, 1 near *John Martin Reservoir State Park*, and another in *Wray*.

**Burrowing Owl** *Athene cunicularia*: A couple at *Chico Basin Ranch*, on a ranch in Kansas, and in *Wray*.

**Boreal Owl** *Aegolius funereus*: Unquestionably, one of the highlights was getting to photograph this owl at night near *Walden*.

#### [Alcedinidae \(Kingfishers\)](#)

**Belted Kingfisher** *Megaceryle alcyon*: A few near *Grand Junction*, and another at *Lake Scott State Park in Kansas*.

#### [Picidae \(Woodpeckers\)](#)

**Lewis's Woodpecker** *Melanerpes lewis*: 2 different singles were watched for lengthy periods in the town of *Buena Vista*.

**Red-bellied Woodpecker** *Melanerpes carolinus*: One was seen during a river walk in *northwest Kansas*.

**Williamson's Sapsucker** *Sphyrapicus thyroideus*: This sharp looking bird was seen among the Ponderosa pines of *Genesee Park*.

**Red-naped Sapsucker** *Sphyrapicus nuchalis*: A pair of these snappy woodpeckers were seen in an area of Aspen near *Grand Mesa*.

**Ladder-backed Woodpecker** *Picoides scalaris*: Two at *Chico Basin Ranch*, one sitting in a pretty flowering *Cholla Cactus*.

**Downy Woodpecker** *Picoides pubescens*: Recorded on 3 tour days, including several times just west of *Denver*.

**Hairy Woodpecker** *Picoides villosus*: Recorded on 4 days, at *Buena Vista*, *Powderhorn*, *Silverthorne*, and *Scott City (Kansas)*.

**American Three-toed Woodpecker** *Picoides dorsalis*: A last minute save by *Ben*. All of our "usual" spots came up blank, before he found one within a large grove of *Aspens* that also held a pair of *Red-naped Sapsuckers*, near *Grand Mesa*.

**Northern Flicker** *Colaptes auratus*: Often seen. Both "Red-shafted" and "Yellow-shafted" forms were involved.

#### [Falconidae \(Falcons and Caracaras\)](#)

**American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius*: A regular roadside bird, in both Colorado and Kansas, *seen on most days*.

**Merlin** *Falco columbarius*: Two singles were seen, 1 at *Lake Scott State Park in Kansas*, and another at *Pawnee National Grassland*.

**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus*: *John S.* and *Ben* got to see and photograph one from a *Lesser Prairie-Chicken* blind in *Kansas*.

**Prairie Falcon** *Falco mexicanus* (GO): A frustrating "guide only" involved a circling bird seen by *Ben* and *Sam* over a *Buena Vista* gas station, which had suddenly disappeared by the time everyone else could get out of the van. This was the *only* "guide only" of the tour.

#### [Tyrannidae \(Tyrant Flycatchers\)](#)

**Eastern Phoebe** *Sayornis phoebe*: This tail-wagging flycatcher was seen along the *Higbee Valley Road*, near *La Junta*.

**Say's Phoebe** *Sayornis saya*: This handsome western flycatcher featured on 5 tour days, including around *Craig*.

#### [Laniidae \(Shrikes\)](#)

**Loggerhead Shrike** *Lanius ludovicianus*: Recorded regularly on the open plains of *southeastern Colorado and Kansas*.

#### [Corvidae \(Crows, Jays, and Magpies\)](#)

**Canada Jay** *Perisoreus canadensis*: Formerly "Gray Jay". Canada's national bird. A pair was found by *Peggy* at *Grand Mesa*.

**Pinyon Jay** *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*: This beautiful blue jay was seen twice, among the red rocks of the *Colorado National Monument*, and also near the *Sharp-tailed Grouse* lek around *Craig*. A much-wanted bird for *Skip*!

**Steller's Jay** *Cyanocitta stelleri*: This striking, punk-haired mountain bird was *seen on 3 days*, (*Powderhorn* and *just west of Denver*).

**Blue Jay** *Cyanocitta cristata*: A single lonely individual was seen on a chilly afternoon at a campground in *Pawnee National Grassland*.

**Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay** *Aphelocoma woodhouseii*: Seen on three different occasions, including at *Black Canyon of the Gunnison*.

**Black-billed Magpie** *Pica hudsonia*: Very common, and widely recorded. *Seen on each day of the tour*.

**Clark's Nutcracker** *Nucifraga columbiana*: 1 at some feeders near *Clear Creek*, west of *Denver*, and another in *Silverthorne*.

**American Crow** *Corvus brachyrhynchos*: Commonly encountered, *on most tour days*.

**Common Raven** *Corvus corax*: A regular roadside bird, *seen on at least 6 tour days*.

#### [Paridae \(Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice\)](#)

**Black-capped Chickadee** *Poecile atricapillus*: 1 was visiting feeders alongside the next species in *Powderhorn*; also at *Black Canyon*.

**Mountain Chickadee** *Poecile gambeli*: Great views and photos at some feeders in *Clear Creek* and *Silverthorne*, just west of *Denver*.

**Juniper Titmouse** *Baeolophus ridgwayi*: This specialist was found beside spectacular red rocks in the *Colorado National Monument*.

#### [Alaudidae \(Larks\)](#)

**Horned Lark** *Eremophila alpestris*: A common and abundant species, frequently encountered on the tour in *Colorado and Kansas*.

### Hirundinidae (Swallows)

**Northern Rough-winged Swallow** *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*: This migrant species was encountered on 4 tour days.

**Tree Swallow** *Tachycineta bicolor*: Seen on at least 3 days of the tour, in Colorado and near Scott City in Kansas.

**Bank Swallow** *Riparia riparia*: Just a few were seen in John Martin Reservoir State Park.

**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica*: The most regularly recorded swallow on the tour, seen on at least 5 days.

**Cliff Swallow** *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*: At least 50 birds were seen during a single morning at John Martin Reservoir State Park.

### Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

**Bushtit** *Psaltriparus minimus*: A single pair was found near Grand Junction.

### Regulidae (Kinglets)

**Ruby-crowned Kinglet** *Regulus calendula*: Skip picked up our only kinglet on call, at Lake Scott State Park in Kansas.

### Sittidae (Nuthatches)

**Red-breasted Nuthatch** *Sitta canadensis* (H): One was heard beside the private feeders we visited in Clear Creek.

**White-breasted Nuthatch** *Sitta carolinensis*: Several visited some feeders at an icicle-encrusted property just west of Denver.

**Pygmy Nuthatch** *Sitta pygmaea*: These energetic songbirds were seen twice near Denver, at Genesee Park and in Silverthorne.

### Troglodytidae (Wrens)

**Rock Wren** *Salpinctes obsoletus*: A cooperative, and photogenic, bird was seen near Orchard City.

**Canyon Wren** *Catherpes mexicanus*: This fittingly named bird was seen in the red rock landscape of the Colorado National Monument.

**Marsh Wren** *Cistothorus palustris*: A retiring calling bird was seen at Lake Scott State Park in Kansas.

### Cinclidae (Dippers)

**American Dipper** *Cinclus mexicanus*: One of North America's most curious species, a pair of which was seen nest building, foraging underwater, and singing from rocks within its riparian habitat near Buena Vista, and even doing a wing-stretching courtship display, much to the pleasure of camera-wielding John K.! Ever popular with all!

### Sturnidae (Starlings)

**European Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*: This introduced species was encountered every day.

### Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

**Curve-billed Thrasher** *Toxostoma curvirostre*: A couple were seen at a Pueblo site that also gave us Scaled Quail.

**Sage Thrasher** *Oreoscoptes montanus*: After missing it in the Utah borderlands, we found one the next day, near Craig.

### Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

**Western Bluebird** *Sialia mexicana*: 4 seen at Genesee Park, included one checking out a cavity in a local Ponderosa pine.

**Mountain Bluebird** *Sialia currucoides*: Recorded on at least 3 days, with our best views arguably coming around Craig, where Ben memorably rescued a male trapped in an abandoned trailer.

**Townsend's Solitaire** *Myadestes townsendi*: Half a dozen birds were seen at Lake Scott State Park, Kansas.

**American Robin** *Turdus migratorius*: A regular feature throughout, seen each day of the tour.

### Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*: Regularly encountered throughout.

### Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

**Cedar Waxwing** *Bombycilla cedrorum*: A single migrant flock of 16 birds were found at Lake Scott State Park in Kansas.

### Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

**American Pipit** *Anthus rubescens*: A single bird flew over calling at the Lesser Prairie-Chicken ranch in Kansas.

### Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

**Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch** *Leucosticte tephrocotis*: 4 birds were found in a large mobile flock of rosy-finches at Silverthorne on our final morning. Both "Gray-crowned" and the striking "Hepburn's" forms were seen within the same flock.

**Black Rosy-Finch** *Leucosticte atrata*: Two singles were found during a tricky time for the species on this year's tour. One was found late in the afternoon at Powderhorn, and another was in a 150-strong flock of all 3 rosy-finches at Silverthorne on our final morning.

**Brown-capped Rosy-Finch** *Leucosticte australis*: The most abundant rosy-finch, with about 150 birds at Silverthorne, and a handful at some Clear Creek feeders too. This has the most limited range of the North American rosy-finches, being mostly confined to Colorado.

**Pine Grosbeak** *Pinicola enucleator*: A female was seen in the snowy "pinescape" of Clear Creek on our first morning. Ben only, saw a male at State Forest State Park later on the tour too.

**House Finch** *Haemorhous mexicanus*: Recorded on 3-4 days.

**Cassin's Finch** *Haemorhous cassinii*: Seen at private feeders in Clear Creek, Powderhorn, and Silverthorne.

**Red Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra*: Ben found an obliging party south of Walden, and an obliging male sat atop a pine in Silverthorne.

**Pine Siskin** *Spinus pinus*: Seen on 3 days, including at the *Clear Creek* feeders near Denver, and at *Lake Scott State Park* in Kansas.

**Lesser Goldfinch** *Spinus psaltria*: Ben and John S. got exclusive looks in *northwest Kansas*.

**American Goldfinch** *Spinus tristis*: A few were seen near *La Junta*, and in *northwest Kansas*.

**Evening Grosbeak** *Coccothraustes vespertinus*: Traditionally, one of the most revered finches in North America. It was seen at some feeders in *Powderhorn*, where a pair visited and the male gave excellent, below eye level, looks. *Ellen* was a particularly big fan!

#### [Calcariidae \(Longspurs and Snow Buntings\)](#)

**Chestnut-collared Longspur** *Calcarius ornatus*: 2 were found at various times, in an active flock of 450+ longspurs at *Pawnee*.

**McCown's Longspur** *Rhynchophanes mccownii*: A new species for *Peggy* and others, the only sighting was a fidgety flock of 450+ birds near *Pawnee National Grassland*.

#### [Passerellidae \(New World Sparrows\)](#)

**Spotted Towhee** *Pipilo maculatus*: A few were seen during our failed "grouse hunt" at *Black Canyon of the Gunnison*.

**Rufous-crowned Sparrow** *Aimophila ruficeps*: After some effort, we finally locked one down along the *Higbee Valley Road*.

**Canyon Towhee** *Melospiza fusca*: Seen three times; firstly in *Chico Basin*, then *Pueblo*, and also along the *Higbee Valley Road*.

**Brewer's Sparrow** *Spizella breweri*: Just the one was seen, near *John Martin Reservoir State Park*.

**Vesper Sparrow** *Pooecetes gramineus*: A few were seen on the way to the *John Martin Reservoir*.

**Black-throated Sparrow** *Amphispiza bilineata*: Arguably, one of the America's most handsome sparrows, was seen near *Cameo*.

**Sagebrush Sparrow** *Artemisospiza nevadensis*: A pair was found on the *Utah* side of the road along the border with Colorado.

**Fox Sparrow** *Passerella iliaca* [*Schistacea Group*]: A pair was seen in a campground in the *Black Canyon of the Gunnison*. This form is known as "Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow.

**Song Sparrow** *Melospiza melodia*: Just a couple of records, including at the *Gunnison Sage-Grouse* spot.

**Lincoln's Sparrow** *Melospiza lincolni*: 1 was seen while we watched a pair of breeding *dippers* south of *Buena Vista*.

**White-crowned Sparrow** *Zonotrichia leucophrys*: The most regularly encountered sparrow, seen on at least 5 tour days.

**Dark-eyed Junco** *Junco hyemalis*: 4 different forms were seen, "Slate-colored", "Gray-headed", "Pink-sided", and "Oregon" Juncos.

#### [Icteridae \(Troupials and Allies\)](#)

**Red-winged Blackbird** *Agelaius phoeniceus*: Regularly noted throughout.

**Western Meadowlark** *Sturnella neglecta*: A common and familiar feature and sound on the shortgrass prairies and farmlands.

**Yellow-headed Blackbird** *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*: Only seen on one occasion, when a spectacular flock of THOUSANDS were gathered around a paddock on a ranch in southeast Colorado.

**Brewer's Blackbird** *Euphagus cyanocephalus*: A large flock was noted on the journey from Colorado to western Kansas.

**Common Grackle** *Quiscalus quiscula*: Recorded on at least four days.

**Great-tailed Grackle** *Quiscalus mexicanus*: Seen on at least four days (e.g., around *Pueblo*).

**Brown-headed Cowbird** *Molothrus ater*: Recorded on a handful of days, including some larger groups around *Pawnee*.

#### [Parulidae \(New World Warblers\)](#)

**Yellow-rumped Warbler** *Setophaga coronata*: The only warblers seen was a pair of "Audubon's" at *Lake Scott* in Kansas.

#### [Cardinalidae \(Cardinals and Allies\)](#)

**Northern Cardinal** *Cardinalis cardinalis*: Just seen once, at *Lake Scott State Park* in Kansas.

**MAMMALS:**

**Muskrat** *Ondatra zibethicus*: Seen a couple of times, including at *Arapaho NWR* just outside *Walden*.

**North American Pocopine** *Erethizon dorsatum*: Two individuals were seen on *Chico Basin Ranch*.

**American Red Squirrel** *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*: Several non-red forms were seen attending the feeders in *Clear Creek*.

**Gunnison Prairie-Dog** *Cynomys gunnisoni*: We stopped for a dog town of this species just north of *Gunnison*.

**White-tailed Prairie-Dog** *Cynomys leucurus*: Many were seen around *Walden*.

**Black-tailed Prairie-Dog** *Cynomys ludovicianus*: Towns were seen in *Chico Basin*, and at the *Kansas prairie-chicken site*.

**Wyoming Ground-Squirrel** *Spermophilus elegans*: *Skip* found a burly individual at the *Black Canyon of the Gunnison*.

**White-tailed Antelope Squirrel** *Ammospermophilus leucurus*: One was seen and photographed close to *Orchard City*.

**Golden-mantled Ground-Squirrel** *Spermophilus lateralis*: A couple were seen around the town of *Powderhorn*.

**Least Chipmunk** *Tamias minimus*: Recorded at a few sites, like *State Forest State Park*, near *Walden*.

**Desert Cottontail** *Sylvilagus audubonii*: Noted on a few days, including near *Grand Junction*.

**Mountain Cottontail** *Sylvilagus nuttallii*: One scampered around the snowy campground at the *Black Canyon of the Gunnison*.

**White-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus townsendi*: 1 was seen near the *Greater Sage-Grouse site* near *Walden*.

**Black-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus californicus*: A few were seen during our time in *Kansas*.

**Coyote** *Canis latrans*: 1 was spotted near *Gunnison* and another on the *journey from Colorado to Kansas*.

**Pronghorn** *Antilocapra americana*: Sometimes referred to as "antelope", these fast mammals were seen on at least 5 days.

**Elk** *Cervus canadensis*: Recorded on a few days, with one herd of 40+ animals seen.

**Moose** *Alces alces*: 2 of these massive mammals were seen foraging in riparian willows near *Walden*.

**Mule Deer** *Odocoileus hemionus*: A regular mammalian accompaniment to the tour, *recorded almost daily*.

**Bighorn Sheep** *Ovis canadensis*: 1 at the scenically spectacular *Colorado National Monument* was our sole sighting.