



COLORADO “CHICKEN ODYSSEY” - TRIP REPORT April 2010
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2010 TRIP SUMMARY

In the 10 years that I've been doing the Colorado “*Chicken Odyssey*,” never has the weather cooperated more than this year. We had mild temperatures, and little to no wind or precipitation; nearly every day showed bright sunshine and blue skies. We drove over 2,200 miles, covering most of the state (and a bit of Kansas) to witness 5 different leks. The Greater Prairie Chicken was voted the group favorite, with Sharp-tailed Grouse a close second. Each of the chicken displays was unique and wonderful in its own way. Other avian highlights included a White-tailed Ptarmigan found on a snowy ridge at 12,000 feet, and about a dozen Mountain Plovers pairing up on the plains of the Pawnee Grasslands. Due to the mild winter, the Rosy-finches were not as plentiful as expected for these high elevation species, though we did enjoy many Brown-capped and a few Black Rosy-finches. It was a great trip to see both crossbills; we saw a pair of White-winged Crossbills tending their offspring in a towering spruce tree, and we got great, close-up views of Red Crossbills on the last day. This trip features much more than birds; we identified 30 mammal species, including Moose, Pronghorn, Elk, Coyote, Red Fox, jackrabbits, prairie-dogs, and 16 species of rodents! With Kevin and I leading 12 participants, we logged an impressive total of 170 bird species for the trip. Read below for more detailed daily highlights.

2010 DAILY HIGHLIGHTS

Arrival Day / April 7

Kevin, Debbie and I arrived today in Denver, Colorado to begin the great “Chicken Odyssey.” This is about my 11th trip here, and each one brings new thrills and excitement. An inch of snow was on the ground and the temperature hovered in the upper 30's. By early afternoon it had warmed up a few degrees and the white blanket was gone. On the short ride from the airport to hotel, we spotted several Red-tailed Hawks soaring over the open plains around the airstrips, and one sitting in its nest quite close to the highway.

After having lunch, picking up the rental vans, and making a run for various supplies, we were free to explore several areas close to our Comfort Inn hotel. We were delighted to find 12 species of ducks and grebes at a nearby community lagoon, including Horned and Eared Grebes both in breeding plumage, Redhead, Ring-necked and Ruddy Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Northern Shoveler and Gadwall. We were able to approach these small reservoirs fairly closely, getting some good photos with great sunlight and blue skies. A couple of Bullfrogs basked in the sun on the water's edge - a first for this trip. Pairs of Killdeer called-out their presence - one pair engaged in clear courtship displays, and we found 3 beautiful American Avocets.

We passed several Prairie Dogs “towns”, these being Black-tailed, where numerous animals popped up and down from their holes, ignoring the nearby highway traffic. They amused us with their loud chirping, tail wagging and sitting up alertly on their haunches.

Our group of 12 birders and 2 leaders assembled this evening from all over the country to enjoy our first of 9 dinners together. We all eagerly anticipated the coming days of exploring the 4 corners of Colorado to see the fascinating courtship displays of Prairie Chickens on their leks, as well as many other avian and wildlife species!

Day 1 / April 8 - Plains, Foothills and Reservoirs

The Rocky Mountain range loomed large and beautiful before us on this bright, sunny morning. Crisp snow-capped peaks beckoned us as we drove north out of Denver, heading for our first stop of the day, Lagerman Reservoir.

We didn't find the reported Sage Sparrow, but enjoyed great looks at American Avocets, Western Meadowlarks, Black-billed Magpie and a distant perched Osprey, as well as several Red-tailed Hawks. Black-tailed Prairie Dogs posed out of their holes, sitting-up in curiosity.

We continued west into the mountains, entering Roosevelt National Forest at the quaint gateway town of Lyons. The plains gave way to aspen, spruce, fir and pine as we ascended a winding road through towering, rocky slopes. In the rugged town of Allenspark, elevation 8,500 feet, we spent much of the morning near the Fawnbrook Inn.

At a few well-stocked feeders we found most of our target species, including a small flock of Brown-capped Rosy-finches, Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskin, Cassin's Finch and Mountain Chickadee. We spent a lot of time comparing five different races of Dark-eyed Juncos - Pink-sided, Gray-headed, Oregon and Slate-colored including the Canadian Rockies race. It was great to see three species of Nuthatches all together - Pygmy, Red-breasted and White-breasted. Walking a little higher up the road - lined with snow and ice in the shade - we found a noisy Stellar's Jay, as well as Clark's Nutcracker and interior west race of Hairy Woodpecker.

Descending back down we stopped to find an American Dipper diving and “swimming” in the fast-flowing, boulder-strewn St. Vrain Creek. Four Bighorn Sheep provided great photos, standing majestically on boulders close to the road.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch at Dawson's Park, on McIntosh Lake in Longmont, eating and scoping numerous breeding plumaged Horned Grebes, some Western Grebes, a few Common Mergansers and a couple of California Gulls.

Soon we were on our way east to bird the plains and agricultural fields southeast of Greeley. We stopped at several different ponds and reservoirs during the afternoon, finding an impressive array of ducks and raptors. Squadrons of American White Pelicans soared overhead, gleaming white against piercing blue skies. We stopped to admire the aptly-named Cinnamon Teal, Greater Yellowlegs and a Wilson's Snipe in one marshy area, and spotted a Burrowing Owl perched on a distant prairie-dog mound. A little later we found a Great Horned Owl in a close tree, making for a two-owl day! We saw many Red-tailed Hawks perched and in flight, along with Northern Harriers, Kestrels and a Bald Eagle.

Our best raptor experience was seeing two Swainson's Hawks interacting. A female landed in a tree, then from high up a male came swooping down and landed on her back - we witnessed a mating! A minute later the two were off, soaring together in the sky. I've never seen a mating where the male landed directly on top of the female from such a height.

Loloff Reservoir hosted a wonderful variety of species and numbers, including hundreds of Lesser Scaup, Redhead, Canvasback, Ruddy Ducks, Common Goldeneye, Blue-winged, Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Bufflehead, Shovelers and Black-necked Stilt.

Our final stop of the day, Glenmere Park in Greeley, featured a nesting colony of Black-crowned Night-herons in a relaxing town park setting. With 72 species for the day, our trip is off to a great start.

Day 2 / April 9 – Pawnee National Grasslands

Colorado weather has been kind to us; we began day two under bright sunny skies, temperatures in the 30's and light wind and finished the day in the mid 60's. Our first stop at Windsor Lake yielded few gulls, but great looks at Western and Clark's Grebe, providing good comparisons. Other waterfowl included shoveler, Redhead, Ruddy Duck, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneyes, Bufflehead and Horned Grebe. We stopped to view a large flock of gulls in a field on our way into Fort Collins, comprised of Franklin's, California and Ring-billed Gulls.

A pair of White-winged Crossbills, uncommon breeders in Colorado, were raising two chicks at Grandview Cemetery in Fort Collins. We got amazing scope views of the nest high up in the dense boughs of a tall spruce tree. A Red-breasted Nuthatch and Pine Siskin also enjoyed that corner of the cemetery.

It wouldn't be a birding trip without a stop at a landfill! In North Weld County we viewed thousands of gulls soaring and swooping around the active garbage trucks, but none of the reported white-wings. We did find one Lesser Black-backed Gull - a first for the Colorado trip - among Ring-billed, Franklins, Herring and California.

We spent the remainder of the morning birding in the Pawnee National Grasslands in northeast Colorado. The shortgrass plains spread out for miles of gently rolling hills, cut by dirt roads and lined with barbed-wire fences. Western Meadowlarks sang melodiously from fence posts, as dozens of Horned Larks flew nervously in the grasses. Our first scope search produced a pair of Mountain Plovers, distinctive but hazy in the distant heat shimmer - a life bird for many in the group! Burrowing Owls posed atop Prairie-dog mounds, while Kestrels, Red-tailed Hawks and a Ferruginous Hawk soared overhead.

The first of many Thirteen-lined Ground-squirrels scooted through the grass, then stood up straight to peer at us. It took a while, but we finally fulfilled our quest for longspurs with a nice pair of McCown's stalking around a debris-filled area that was apparently quite popular with clay-pigeon shooters. Near the highway, a large area of cow dung attracted 7 Mountain Plovers in close view, and a pair of Killdeer.

The Crow Valley campgrounds in Briggsdale proved popular for birders, as word quickly spread about a Yellow-throated Warbler in a shady grove. We appreciated the bird as well as the bathroom break. In our last pass through the Pawnees, at Murphy's Pasture, the freshly-graded dirt roads attracted many Horned Larks and longspurs, giving us good looks at McCown's, including a displaying pair, but no

confirmed Chestnut-collared. A Loggerhead Shrike perched predictably on a wire, adding to our growing list.

The two-and-a-half hour drive east to Wray was surprisingly void of birds, but we managed to get two great views of Rough-legged Hawks, one soaring right over the vehicle. Several Ring-necked Pheasants were seen close to our destination. Mostly we saw acres of monotonous fields dotted with grain silos, oil pumps, windmills, dusty pick-up trucks, weathered farm buildings, and expansive feed lots where beef cows awaited their fate in huge pens. The "All-America City" of Wray greeted us with a giant banner reading, "Welcome Prairie-chicken viewers." After a rushed dinner at Subway, we attended an orientation about the Greater Prairie-chickens, and what to expect at the leks. Tomorrow promises to be another exciting day.

Day 3 / April 10 - The Sandhill Dancers

Booming, stomping, strutting, stamping, clucking, screeching and jumping. These are just a few ways to describe the incredible displays of the Greater Prairie-chickens. After decades of population decline, this remarkable grassland species is now recovering sufficiently so that Colorado has "upgraded" their status from Endangered to Special Concern. Under direction from the Wray Chamber of Commerce partnering with the Colorado Division of Wildlife and Kitzmiller Grazing Association, we witnessed one of nature's most amazing behaviors - the mating rituals of the 'Sandhill Dancers' on their lekking grounds. This large lek was characterized by flat open short grass habitat surrounded by rolling sand hills of low brush.

Our morning began early, with birders from all over the country situated in a mobile blind by 5:30am, well before daylight. We could hear the birds booming even before we could see them in the pre-dawn darkness. As the sky slowly turned orange and pink, the chickens emerged from the shadows. The lek became alive with activity, as many females stalked around, and the males worked hard to defend their small territories and prove their worthiness through dominance and eye-catching displays.

The males raised their tail and pinnae (on their head) feathers, and puffed out their timpani - the yellow and orange air sac on their neck and eye brows - to create a colorful appearance and impress the females. If a female was sufficiently interested, she squatted down in front of the male and spread her wings. This was the signal for the lucky male to mount her and mate. It was over in a blink - she shook her feathers, and both birds parted ways, likely to mate again. We witnessed six copulations!

The older, dominant males command the center of the lek, enticing the females to walk through, while forcing the younger males to stay at the periphery of the loose circle. If the outsiders crossed territory boundaries - invisible to us, but apparently clear to the birds - the dominant males would immediately chase-away the offender in a flurry of running, wing-flapping and jumping. Males were constantly vying for attention and status, eager to show their worthiness to the females. The Greater Prairie-chicken courting rituals peak in mid-April, and we were fortunate to see a high number of birds - over 20 males and 33 females.

After about two hours of watching the amazing displays, we left the blind and headed to the Kitzmiller Grazing Association, where we hungrily devoured an excellent ranch country breakfast of fresh eggs, thick-cut bacon and homemade pancakes. Though temperatures hovered around 40 degrees at this hour, the ample supply of hot coffee went a long way towards warming up our frozen hands and feet!

Leaving Wray, we headed south along the eastern edge of the state, straight down Rte 385. The day's long drive was broken up by a few birding stops. At Bonny State Park we did not find any owls, but added a few new birds to our list, including Eastern Bluebird, Spotted Towhee, Cedar Waxwing and Wild Turkey. We passed many raptors perched on poles or flying over fields while driving. We got great looks at Ferruginous Hawk, Rough-legged Hawks, numerous Red-tails, Northern Harrier and American Kestrel. Sheridan Lake was rimmed with salt, but contained enough water to host Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs.

Near the end of the day, our energy levels spiked with a productive drive down the long dirt road "M" in the southeast corner of the state. Driving east into Kansas, there was an impressive showing of Swainson's Hawk, along with some of the above-mentioned raptors, as well as Long-billed Curlew, Barn Swallow, Vesper Sparrow, Say's Phoebe, and Ring-necked Pheasant. We saw several Mule Deer, White-tailed Deer and some large herds of Pronghorn. Chihuahuan Raven nests on windmill structures appeared empty, but a few birds were seen at a distance.

Racing the setting sun, we crossed into Kansas just before sunset. Predictably, the first bird on the new state list was a Western Meadowlark. As the sky filled with pink and purple, we scouted the Elkhart East Prairie-chicken lek in preparation for tomorrow morning. Another mesmerizing chicken experience awaits us.

Day 4 / April 11 - Dawn on a Kansas Prairie

In pre-dawn darkness, we arrived at the Elkhart East viewing area. The music of the shortgrass prairie was already playing, with the melodious burbling of Horned Larks, sweet notes of meadowlarks and the cackling, bubbling sounds of the Lesser Prairie-chickens. Though we couldn't yet see them, we knew they were there, engaging in their spring courtship ritual as they have done for millions of years. We felt privileged to be able to share in their world - just us and them - however briefly.

A faint orange glow spread slowly across the eastern horizon behind the lek. Our two vehicles were positioned to maximize viewing through open doors and windows. We were the only ones there, and felt a special joy at being able to experience the birds by ourselves, in kinship and surprising comfort - temperatures were in the mid-40's, with a slight breeze. The lek was about 80 yards away, twice the distance of the Greater Prairie-chicken lek, and the grasses were considerably taller, which is preferred by the Lesser's. Dark shadows could be seen lifting off the ground to a height of about four feet and descending a short distance away.

In this habitat, the males incorporate a lot of jumping into their elaborate displays, trying to make themselves more noticeable above tall blades of grass. This was good for us too, as we were only able to see only the tops of pinnae (head) feathers when they were standing away from the main narrow lekking strip. As the sky lightened, we could see more birds in front of us, clustered together at the lek.

Their numbers peaked at about 25 males and 6 females, though there were likely more birds that we couldn't see. This total was outstanding - the most I've seen on a trip by far! Whenever a female would fly into the lek the activity would reach a crescendo as males rose up in unison to let her know that this was where she should land.

For two hours we enjoyed a magical scene of Lesser Prairie-chickens on the lek, with larks singing, a Burrowing Owl flying low between its favored mounds, and the chickens dancing under a lightly-clouded sky whose textures constantly changed.

As the lek activity began to wane, we focused our attention on a Cassin's Sparrow perched on the distant ridge, occasionally jumping up and fluttering down. Finally we pulled away from the lek, stomachs rumbling and faces smiling. The insect-like buzz of a Grasshopper Sparrow was heard, and a flock of White-crowned Sparrows lined up on a gate post. After a delicious buffet breakfast we loaded up for the long journey westward back into Colorado. We drove a few yards into the adjoining state of Oklahoma - a "life state" for some! Back in Kansas, a brief stop at the Elkhart Wastewater Treatment plant yielded a few waterfowl, close looks at Franklin's Gulls, a pair of Least Sandpipers and Black-crowned Night-herons for our day list.

Traversing the Comanche National Grasslands from east to west, we found many of the same species as yesterday - Vesper Sparrows, a pair of Mountain Plovers and Swainson's Hawks. Several longspurs did not show well enough for positive identification. We enjoyed a flock of Lark Buntings, and a perched Loggerhead Shrike. Great birds were seen near an abandoned homestead, including Chihuahuan Raven, Great Horned Owl, Barn Owl and Prairie Falcon. We found 4 Brown-headed Cowbirds, a surprisingly good species for this area.

The shortgrass plains changed to pinyon juniper, cactus and rocky slopes as we descended into Cottonwood Canyon. Bewick's Wrens serenaded us during our lovely picnic lunches near a babbling creek. Rock Wren and Song Sparrow added to the afternoon chorus. Several Rock Squirrels scampered on rust-colored boulders, one in particular had his cheeks stuffed. A Mountain Bluebird perched brightly on a wire, not far from Wild Turkeys and Mule Deer.

Woodpeckers abounded with Downy, Hairy, Northern Flicker (red-shafted), Ladder-backed and two Lewis' Woodpeckers. A lifer for many, the Lewis' showed-off from a high Cottonwood branch, swooping out and back like a flycatcher. We also found one Eastern Phoebe and several Say's.

After a long afternoon drive westward, we reached Pueblo West with just enough daylight to find two Curve-billed Thrashers and a bevy of Scaled Quail. Ten minutes later, and it would've been too dark to find these birds. Shortly thereafter we reached Canon City, ate dinner and checked into our hotel. Most people were ready for sleep, but a few of us tried for one last species. We found a pair of Western Screech-owls including one that was pensively sitting in the open. It was a wonderful ending to the day and we managed to get back well before midnight!

Day 5 / April 12 - Into the Rockies

Following yesterday's long day we were able to sleep in and leave at 7am this morning. Beginning in Canon City, the Valco Ponds produced a pair of Black Phoebes and Belted Kingfishers that skimmed the water surface for a drink. There was a trio of female ducks swimming together, Common Goldeneye, Hooded and Common Merganser, something that is not often encountered. Swallows are beginning to return now that it is mid-April and the handful swooping over the pond included Violet-green, Northern Rough-winged and Tree.

In the Pinyon-Juniper-Pine habitat of Temple Canyon Park our target was the Juniper Titmouse. Before we finally found a couple of them, we had good looks at several Western Scrub Jays, Townsend's Solitaires, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Bewick's Wren, Bushtits and Spotted Towhee. As is often the case,

Juniper Titmouse never sit still and have moved on by the time one raises binoculars to view them! We followed them. We lost track of them. We relocated them. Not everyone got to see them. By the time a couple more were found in another location, everyone had satisfactory looks at this rather plain bird.

At Royal Gorge we had breathtaking views looking down at Colorado's Natural Wonder. A thousand feet below the Arkansas River cuts a path as narrow as 50 feet at the base of this steep gorge. At the top, one of the highest suspension bridges in the world spans a distance of 900 feet. Chattering White-throated Swifts were a constant presence - how often does one get to look down on them as they showed their agility and speed around the gorge?

The drive into the Rocky Mountains can only be described as stunning. The scenery is gorgeous as we wound our way along the Arkansas River, through pinyon habitat and into extensive stands of evergreen, aspen and snow-covered peaks. We crossed the Continental Divide for the first time at Monarch Pass, elevation 11,312 feet.

Dropping down into the Gunnison Basin, a pair of majestic Golden Eagles soared above the road. A stop at the Waunita Hot Springs lek allowed us to get a panoramic view of the setting for tomorrow morning's Gunnison Sage Grouse show.

Day 6 / April 13 - Gorgeous Gunnison Grouse

It was a magical morning in Gunnison, Colorado, where everything unfolded perfectly. We met our host at 4:30am and followed him to the Waunita Hot Springs lek. The sky glowed with the Milky Way, planet Jupiter and millions of twinkling stars. At 5am, about an hour and a half before sunrise, we were inside the mobile trailer blind, bundled with blankets and polar-weather clothing, prepared for a long, cold vigil. Astonishingly, we stayed warm and comfortable for the next three hours, as temperatures quickly rose into the forties and the wind never picked up until late in our watch.

With the blind windows raised, the sound of the nearby babbling brook drowned out any possibility of hearing the distant grouse. However the winnowing of a Wilson Snipe was heard as it took off from the wet meadow below the blind in the pre-dawn darkness.

As daylight emerged, we counted 35 magnificent Gunnison Sage-grouse - 21 males and 14 females. Their lek was comprised of shortgrass meadow, dotted with low bushes. A sagebrush hillside formed the backdrop, with patches of snow in the shadows. Though the birds were over 300 yards away, we were able to get good looks through our scopes. The large males strutted about, turning different directions in their displays, not always towards a female. They fanned-out their giant spiky tail feathers, and inflated two egg-like air sacs on their chests. They raised their wings and flicked their heads forward, tossing their thick, dark filoplumes forward. Though they didn't jump and stamp like the Prairie-chickens, they worked hard to impress the females, who seemed somewhat placid and indifferent!

A large portion of the group flushed and flew off at 6:31am, leaving 18 birds. A few more left shortly after, leaving just one female. Only one of the 12 remaining males vied for her attention, but she barely glanced at him. Finally this last group started flying off, and some of them landed close to our blind, much to our delight. By 8:15am the show was over, and we were out of the blind on our way back to the hotel, energized by such a wonderful experience with Gunnison Sage Grouse.

After breakfast we journeyed north to Crested Butte, elevation 8,885 feet, in search of Rosy-finches. One feeder in this quaint town hosted Dark-eyed Juncos, White-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain and Black-capped Chickadee, along with a handful of Brown-capped Rosy-finches. Walking up and down the residential streets we saw a large flock of about 70 finches flying in a circle. We quickly followed them back to the feeder where we found two Black Rosy-finches among the many Brown-caps. We searched further, but could not find any Gray-crowned.

We continued west on Route 50, driving from Gunnison to Montrose and beyond. The weather cooperated with sunshine and blue skies, and an occasional large cloud to shadow the Rocky Mountains and valleys. We spotted soaring Red-tailed Hawks, Clark's Nutcracker, Spotted Towhee, Common Mergansers, and a flock of American Pipits. A probable Northern Shrike flew across the road, but was not seen again to confirm it. Mammals included herds of Elk and Mule Deer, and a single Coyote walking up the rocky, sage-covered hillside.

We were most thrilled to see a pair of Golden Eagles flying high over the ridge line, with one of them stooping and soaring in marvelous display.

A brief visit to picturesque the Black Canyon yielded Mountain and Western Bluebirds, Townsend's Solitaire, Cooper's Hawk and two more Golden Eagles.

The last part of the day was light on birds, but great on scenery, with magnificent rocky slopes and jagged, snow-capped peaks shining in the setting sun during our drive up Unaweep Canyon.

Day 7 / April 14 - Canyons and Cranes

Today's highlights covered a variety of habitats, species and miles in the western part of Colorado. Our first stop of the day was on the outskirts of Grand Junction at the Palisades Orchards, where we quickly found our target Gambel's Quail, sitting up on a brush pile in clear view.

Sunshine and blue skies kept us smiling as we explored Little Book Cliffs in Cameo. The red, rocky slopes bordering the dirt road reminded us of habitat typical in Utah, not very far away, and we enjoyed a lovely walk up the canyon, looking and listening all the way. Our target Chukar proved elusive, though we scanned just about every boulder on the hillsides where we heard more than one calling, but could not locate the birds.

We got great looks at Black-throated Sparrows perched on low sage bushes, Western Scrub Jays perched a little higher, brightly-colored Mountain Bluebirds flitting about, and an American Kestrel hunting low among the rocks. The melodies of singing Rock Wrens echoed wonderfully off the canyon walls, mixed with the distinctive calls of a flock of Pinyon Jays. We found a lone Gray Flycatcher and followed it until everyone got a satisfactory look at this round-headed, tail-bobbing *empidonax*. A few White-throated Swifts swooped high in the air, but Golden Eagles soared even higher over the ridges, flashing their golden hackles.

The long drive from the Grand Mesa surrounding Grand Junction to Steamboat Springs was punctuated by several good bird sightings, including many Black-billed Magpies in fields, several pairs of stunning Cinnamon Teal, numerous kestrels, and a Bald Eagle on a giant nest. The highway heading north hugged the Colorado River, then followed the Yampa River as we climbed towards the

northwestern corner of the state. Both watercourses hosted many Common Mergansers and a variety of waterfowl.

Our mammal list expanded with sightings of Yellow-bellied Marmot, Least Chipmunks, Golden-mantled Ground-squirrel, Beaver and Wild Horses, along with the now-familiar Elk, Mule Deer, Pronghorn and Eastern Cottontail.

Though it was hard to top Little Book Cliffs, the highlight of the day came near the end. As we approached Steamboat Springs the setting sun illuminated a huge flock of Sandhill Cranes spread out on a cultivated field. Many of the birds were jumping and dancing in display, sounding out their familiar bugling call.

The sights and sounds of the cranes were magnificent, but the Sharp-tailed Grouse show was even better! As shadows lengthened, we watched about a dozen grouse feeding and a few displaying less than 30 yards away from us. A large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds harmonized with the sunset symphony, while a few Yellow-headed added color to the group. A beautiful "gray ghost" Northern Harrier hunted low over the fields, passing close to an intermediate morph Swainson's Hawk standing on the ground. We ended our wonderful day with a delicious dinner at "Big House Burgers" in Steamboat Springs, thrilled with the day's events and looking forward to the morning show of Sharp-tailed Grouse on their lek!

Day 8 / April 15 - Sharp-tails, Scenery, Signs and Sage

We have enjoyed some marvelous scenery this past week in Colorado, but today really stood out as stunning. The Sharp-tailed Grouse display on a lek was framed by snow-capped mountains, rolling hills, shimmering fields, sage brush and picturesque western wooden fences. It was an amazing experience to see the birds in this setting. Arriving at very first light, the temperatures were in the mid 20's with no wind. At dawn the sun rose over Steamboat Springs and yet again we were extremely lucky with the weather.

About 25 Sharp-tailed Grouse were present and loosely centered on a snow-covered gently sloping area. The males were beautiful with their mottled, earth-toned plumage and white undertail feathers. In display they bowed to expose their white undertails, held out their bowed wings, inflated their lilac-mauve timpani (air sacs), rattled their stiff upright central tail feathers and rapidly stamped their feet to make a distinct drumming sound on the crusty snow surface. The birds moved with extraordinary speed, covering great distance to chase a rival male away. Two females were present but neither really expressed any interest.

The rising sun brought increased activity for the large flock of Sandhill Cranes that we saw the previous evening, many of them jumping and tossing bits of debris in courtship display. A Northern Harrier and Swainson's Hawk were again seen as we left the lek area.

After Starbucks and breakfast, we headed for Dry Lake Campground, on the outskirts of Steamboat Springs to look for Dusky Grouse. We climbed the winding dirt road to elevation 8,300 feet, marveling at the stunning views of the valley below, the white-barked Aspens and Lodgepole Pines around us. We noticed many of the pines had fallen victim to bark beetle disease, their needles brown and lifeless. The road closed at the campground due to snow, so we parked and walked. The sky was brilliant blue and the hot sun was blinding on the snow; soon we all shed a few layers.

The forest was fairly quiet, but we found a lovely Red-naped Sapsucker working the aspens around the car park. Stellar's Jay, Tree Swallows, Northern Flicker, Mountain Chickadees and Dark-eyed Juncos were present, and a few of the group saw a Yellow-rumped Warbler.

Back down in Steamboat Springs, at a local resident's feeder, we enjoyed a variety of species at close range, including Pine and Evening Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, Cassin's Finch and Red-breasted Nuthatch.

After the daily stop at Safeway for lunch, we followed the highway east, admiring more majestic views climbing through Rabbit Ears Pass, elevation 9,426 feet, and crossed the Continental Divide twice in the space of a mile. Soon we dropped down about 1,500 feet into the "North Park" area - a giant basin surrounded by mountains, in which the small town of Walden was established in 1889.

A sign proclaimed that Walden was the "Moose Viewing Capital of Colorado," and we were thrilled to spot a Moose shortly thereafter - a female standing amid gorgeous yellow willows and red dogwoods along a creek. Along this stretch we also found a Gray Jay perched atop a shrub.

The Moose Creek Visitors Center provided excellent opportunity to study many feeder birds, in particular Cassin's Finches for the Easterners in the group. Pine Grosbeaks, Mountain and Black-capped Chickadees landed within a few feet of us, intent on the seed buffet. Several Least Chipmunks scampered among the birds while Steller's Jays kept to themselves in the pines.

The Walden Reservoir attracted myriad species, keeping us occupied for over an hour. We enjoyed Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, many Redheads, Canvasback, Ruddy Duck, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, and Common Goldeneye, as well as American Avocet, Sandhill Cranes and squadrons of American White Pelicans. A surprise Snowy Egret stood out in his 'yellow slippers' in a cow pasture, not far from a group of lively Wyoming Ground Squirrels.

The sun set in brilliant shades of pink and orange as we drove down Route 14, a.k.a. "Raptor Alley." We counted 7 Swainson's and 1 Red-tailed Hawk all perched on electric poles. Mountain Bluebirds, Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds were on the wires, while Kestrels and Magpies were all over the fields. Sagebrush spread out as far as the eye could see, hosting Horned Larks, Sage and Vesper Sparrows, herds of Pronghorn and a lone Coyote. Sage Thrashers focused on displaying - one of them preferring the additional height that the rooftop of Kevin's vehicle provided! We scouted the area, hoping to find a few Greater Sage Grouse. Two birds flew over as a preview for tomorrow morning's exciting show - a glorious way to end another spectacular day in Colorado.

Day 9 / April 16 - Gorgeous Grouse and Tantalizing Ptarmigan

What a fabulous show of Greater Sage Grouse this morning! The birds congregated barely 40 yards away from our roadside location, giving great views of all the action. The scenery was stunning, enhanced by coyotes howling in the distance.

In the pre-dawn darkness, we were able to discern the bright white chests of 10 oversized males, already puffed-out in display. As the sun rose behind us, there were 19 females milling around in anticipation. We saw that there were actually two different leks - the primary one directly next to us, and a smaller one a little farther down the road. The secondary lek held 6 males and about 14 females. In the next hour, the females intermingled, with most joining the primary group.

Greater Sage Grouse put on a magnificent courtship display. The males puff-out their chest in a striking white collar and bib; they repeatedly inflate two olive-green air sacs that appear like two jiggling eggs; their long tail feathers stand straight up in a spiky-pointed fan and are not as boldly marked as the Gunnison Sage Grouse; and as they inflate their chests they lift up their wings which scrape against the white feathers making a sound similar to the rustle of a gortex jacket. Other differences that separate the identification of Greater versus Gunnison Sage Grouse, include their size, the thinner, shorter and fewer strands of their filoplumes, and their calls.

The males spar with each other, clacking their bills and violently slapping their wings at each other, as the dominant males hold onto their position in the center of the lek. We noticed that only one male did all the mating. He took about 10 females in front of us, and maybe more over the course of an hour and a half; it happens so quickly that it's easy to miss. Interestingly, there were two females wearing neck transmitters, with long thin wires sticking out of their backs. Fortunately, it didn't seem to impact them, as we saw the male mate with one of them. As has been the case with most days on this trip, the sun was bright, the sky was blue, and there was no wind, making for yet another wonderful chicken experience!

After breakfast at Moose Creek Cafe, we left Walden and drove through the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge. This expansive refuge featured gently rolling hills of sagebrush and a meandering willow-lined creek. We saw the expected species - Horned Lark, Western Meadowlark, American White Pelican, Black-billed Magpie, Mountain Bluebirds and Sandhill Cranes. Raptors were plentiful, including the now-familiar Swainson's Hawk, American Kestrel, Golden Eagle, and two Bald Eagles - one adult, one juvenile. Herds of Pronghorn grazed nearby, and we added White-tailed Prairie Dog to our growing list of mammals.

Continuing our journey, we drove through the Arapaho National Forest with its dense stands of spruce, aspen and, sadly, dead pine trees, before crossing the Continental Divide for the fifth time, at Willow Creek Pass, elevation 9,683 feet. A highlight of this short drive was seeing a gorgeous Red Fox right in the middle of the road. We slowed to watch him, and he hesitated a moment before sauntering to the side, pausing to look at us several times.

Water levels in the Windy Gap Reservoir were lower than I've ever seen, but hundreds of waterfowl didn't mind. Our target Barrow's Goldeneye was seen immediately - there were about a dozen of them - providing good comparison with the numerous Common Goldeneye. Ring-necked Ducks, Redheads, Lesser Scaup, Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Coot and Common Merganser were all present.

We reached Georgetown by 2:30, giving us time to check our bags into the hotel and change into our warmest clothing for the last part of the day. Soon we were climbing the steep road into Loveland Pass, parking in the lot at nearly 12,000 feet elevation! At this height, we lost our breath quickly and moved slowly. Once again, the weather cooperated and the summit remained sunny and clear, with light chilly winds and a high of 52.

For over two hours we searched for the White-tailed Ptarmigan, determined not to miss this target species, a life bird for many. We were not the only ones enjoying Loveland Pass, as groups of energetic young snowboarders and skiers chose this location as a springboard for off-trail boarding. One group of 4 young men had a dog with them, who was thrilled to chase them at top speed down the steep decline - amazing! Finally I spotted a ptarmigan far in the distance - a pure white ball revealing himself in a narrow patch of grass outlined by snow and rocks. Ptarmigans can be very difficult to find with their perfectly-adapted camouflage, and I was thrilled when every person in our group saw this bird well. It

was good timing, as snow squalls moved into the area and obscured all visibility of our bird just as we were getting ready to leave.

In the nearby town of Idaho Springs we enjoyed a delicious dinner at “Tommy Knocker” restaurant and brewery. With excellent micro-brews we toasted the Ptarmigan, and all the wonderful birds seen, on this final evening of our trip.

Day 10 / April 17 - Genesee Gems

It was a treat to sleep-in today, the last morning of our trip. After a tasty breakfast and coffee at the local Mountain Buzz cafe, we were on our way a few minutes after 8 am. We drove slowly around the small historic district of Georgetown, admiring many buildings, churches and houses constructed during the height of the silver mine industry, in the mid 1870's. The old jailhouse was nothing more than a square, flat-roofed stone structure with 2 jail cells to keep 'inebriates... and stray dogs.' The original padlock still serves to secure the building today, now a historic landmark. We turned a corner and stopped short to admire a Red Fox eating bird seed in the middle of the road. He was more concerned with his meal than of our two vans - clearly he was accustomed to people.

Our main destination today was Genesee Park, in the foothills west of Denver. It was a very birdy spot, and we enjoyed the bustle of activity from a variety of species. Just inside the park, we pulled over to study a flock of birds flitting in and out of a roadside puddle to drink and bathe. We watched them with delight from just a few yards away.

There were at least 4 Red Crossbills present - 1 male, 2 females and a young male showing a hepatic color instead of true red. Cassin's Finches also enjoyed the water and roadside grit, alongside numerous Pine Siskins. There were many Pygmy Nuthatches, some obviously attempting to nest, as well as Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches.

At the top of the hill near the car park, we found our target - a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers. The male showed a black back, strong yellow wash down the front, and a blood-red throat. In contrast, the female was overall paler brown, with horizontal barring on her back. Both sexes showed a black breast band and yellow underbelly. The whole group enjoyed great looks, as we followed the male down a trail and into a clearing where many birds were active. Eventually we reached what was likely his nest hole, as there were 4 holes in the dead tree, and he circled several times around this spot. A Cooper's Hawk called, but we could not locate it. We got our best looks of Western Bluebirds, which show rusty patches and cobalt blue, in contrast to the turquoise blue color of the Mountain Bluebird.

The park grounds were covered with needles and cones from a variety of fir, spruce and pine trees. As some of us attested, the thick bark of Ponderosa Pines smelled like butterscotch or vanilla, depending on your nose! Several black morph Abert's Squirrel caught our attention with their long tufted ears, as they chose their favorite cones to eat. Other mammals included a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel scampering amongst a boulder pile, and bison grazing at the Buffalo Bill center.

Heading east to Denver Airport, we detoured briefly to find 3 Eared Grebes among a variety of waterfowl in a residential community pond. A Red-tailed Hawk circled majestically overhead, a fitting farewell to our 10-day tour of Colorado. Thanks to everyone on the trip who made this such a wonderful and enjoyable “*Chicken Odyssey*.”