



COLORADO CHICKEN ODYSSEY - TRIP REPORT 2014

By Adrian Binns, April 2014

Day 1 / April 8 - Genesse Park; Silverthorne; Loveland Pass

Anne and I coming from different coasts arrived in Denver mid morning. Once we had our vehicle squared away we picked up Bob, Randy and Jerry a short distance away in Aurora, where they had spent the night. We made the first of what would be many supermarket stops at Safeway to pick up lunch and we were on our way the beginning of our 10-day Chicken Odyssey.

It was a lovely bright sunny day with temperatures in the 50's by the time we left the plains and headed into the Rockies. Our first stop was at the Ponderosa Pines in Genesse Park, a lovely spot at about 8000' where we soon found a pair of Pygmy Nuthatches inspecting their new nest much to the dismay of a pair of Western Bluebirds that no doubt had their eye on that cavity as well. Mountain Chickadees were soon spotted working the pines needles as Dark-eyed Juncos rummaged about the wet grasses and thin stripes of snow that remained. Our target here was Williamson's Sapsucker, but it was two other woodpeckers, a Red-Shafted Northern Flicker and Hairy Woodpecker that would show first. We did not have to wait long for a male Williamson's to come and check out several trees much to the delight of Bob and Jerry who snapped away and Randy who was excited to get a new bird under his belt!

Really we could not have asked for a nicer day to go up Loveland Pass and look for White-tailed Ptarmigan, but alas, once we got to the base of pass we found the pass to be closed. Something to do with recent avalanches. We opted to try our luck for rosy-finches in Silverthorne instead. We found a spot that had Evening Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins coming to a feeder. That was an excellent start. Soon there was a couple of Brown-capped Rosy-finches that made a foray to the feeding tray. Though there were only a handful of Brown's I felt strongly that if waited there was always the chance another species would appear. With Anne keeping an eye on a certain platform feeder, she excitedly exclaimed that there was a Black Rosy-finch, a fine male at that. Ten minutes later with a big smile on her face she said 'Gray-crowned', and surely enough another fine specimen was there for us to ogle. 3 species amongst a dozen or so rosy-finches, we could not believe our luck. Patience paid off. Leaving Silverthorne we encountered a beautiful pair of Mountain Bluebirds that posed for us on the deck of a house.

Happy with our luck, we opted to see if for any reason Loveland Pass was open, and surprisingly, it was! For two hours we scoured the barren landscape above and along the treeline at 12,000' but could not muster a ptarmigan. It would have to wait till the morning.

We enjoyed an excellent BBQ chicken pizza that went down well with white wine at Alpine Tavern in Georgetown.

Day 2 / April 9 - Loveland Pass; Salida, Pueblo West

Following a hearty breakfast at the Mountain Buzz Cafe in Georgetown we returned to Loveland Pass where the wind died down from the previous afternoon and with a clear sunny sky, the 26 degree temperature at 12,000 ft actually felt pleasant.

It took but a minute to locate a White-tailed Ptarmigan feeding about 300 yards away along a strip of exposed vegetation. Certainly scope views were very acceptable. A few American Pipits flew overhead. To our astonishment we had a absolutely gorgeous Red Fox come over a ridge below us, sniffing the ground possibly in search of a ptarmigan, and working its way ever closer to us until it came to within 10 feet without a care in the world. This would be the first of 9 mammals we would encounter over the course of our day, which took us from Loveland Pass to Pueblo West, a drop of 7000 ft in elevation. The others were - Coyote, Mule Deer, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Wyoming Ground Squirrel, Rock Squirrel, Bighorn Sheep, Striped Skunk and a bat species.

After leaving the spectacular scenery of Loveland Pass we began our long journey south heading over another high elevation at Leadville before beginning the steady descent into pinyon habitat. Several spots along the way produced Red Crossbills feeding on grit beside the road, a Golden Eagle, an immature Ferruginous Hawk hunting ground squirrels from a line of fence posts, Western Meadowlarks, Killdeer and an early returning Loggerhead Shrike.

By the time we reached Salida the wind had picked up considerably, a steady 25 mph. We came across a noisy flock of Pinyon Jays that spent most of their time low in the pinyon pines out of the wind though two did sit up very nicely for Jerry and Bob to snap away. Our beautiful drive continued along the winding Arkansas River through the Bighorn Sheep Canyon. One brief moment saw a Golden Eagle and Red-tailed Hawk tangle and tumble before going their separate ways, and, we even encountered another flock of Pinyon Jays.

At Royal Gorge, last summer's fire had devastated much of the pinyon habitat leaving it looking more like a moonscape. White-throated Swifts zipped by above us at amazing speed. The last section of the road leading to the bridge was close due to construction so we diverted to a scenic point with yet another stunning view of this part of this state.

We made one stop in Canon City at the pond at the entrance to Tunnel Drive which held Double-crested Cormorants, a female Hooded Merganser, a lone Green-winged Teal, Redhead and several Common Goldeneyes, before continuing onto Pueblo West. Driving the neighborhoods we soon came across Say's Phoebe, pairs of Scaled Quail along with many Great-tailed Grackles. The small pond at Cattail Crossing held a female Canvasback, two male Lesser Scaups and many American Coots.

Following a most enjoyable Mexican meal at El Caporal in Canon City we went owling along the Riverwalk. While we did not hear any owls, maybe it was the bright moonlit night or owls just being owls, we did hear Wood Ducks and get to see our first White-crowned Sparrow in the spotlight!

Day 3 / April 10 - Valco Ponds; Temple Canyon; Tunnel Drive; Waunita Hot Springs; Crested Butte

We began today birding around Canon City where we started at Valco Ponds. There was an assortment of waterfowl, Green-winged Teal, Blue-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Bufflehead, Ring-necked Duck, Hooded Mergansers, Northern Shovelers and Pied-billed Grebe.

Heading towards Temple Canyon we stopped at Centennial Park where the small pond held a hundred American Wigeon and nothing else but a few odd ball farm ducks! Driving through the Pinyon Pine and Juniper habitat that lines either side of the road through Temple Canyon we spotted a Townsend's Solitaire atop one.

Getting out the car we soon found several Juniper Titmouse which were relatively cooperative as they moved about the area we were in. Five Bushtits when showed themselves though they seemed to prefer hanging around the lower extremities of the trees and just inside. A Spotted Towhee sat up and sang for a long time making it easy for us to locate and photograph it. This was followed by Western Scrub Jays and a Canyon Towhee.

Our last stop was at Tunnel Drive where we walked the gorgeous trail for 3/4's of a mile in search of Rufous-crowned Sparrows, but never could find one. Rock Wrens put on a nice show with one pair attending to a nest low in a cactus and a pair of courting Say's Phoebe. We encountered our first butterflies of the trip on this lovely bright 65 degree morning, a Cabbage White, Mourning Cloak and several Eastern Tiger Swallowtails, along with a couple of Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels. Upon returning to our vehicle we noticed a Canyon Towhee foraging under the vehicle!

Leaving Canon City behind we retraced our tracks from yesterday, driving Bighorn Sheep Canyon where we could see multiple pairs of Common Mergansers swimming or loafing on boulders on the Arkansas River.

Following a lunch stop at our trusted Safeway in Salida we continued over Monarch Pass, making a stop at the gift shop for the most delicious maple nut fudge we had ever tasted, before descending into a very windy Gunnison basin. The recent warmer days were beginning to thaw out the snow along the willow lined creek beds leaving many of the cattle fields covered in water.

A Swainson's Hawk was spotted cruising from one fence post to another, finding the perfect one for it to feed on a small unidentified rodent. Randy's eagle eyes picked out a Golden Eagle soaring above the hills.

We made a stop at the Waunita Hot Springs so that we could orientate ourselves with the direction and distance from the blind that the Gunnison Sage Grouse lek would be when we visit in the morning. There was a light morph Rough-legged Hawk working the hillside behind the lek and Anne spotted 18 Sandhill Cranes in flight in the distance, which came close enough to see well through our optics.

Our last stop for the day was in the beautiful ski resort town of Crested Butte, 25 miles north of Gunnison. Though they had experienced a tremendous amount of snow fall this winter, as was evident by snow banks as high as the eaves on some of the houses, there was a lack of birds. One feeder hosted a couple of dozen Pine Siskins and a female Cassin's Finch was spotted high in a tree singing away.

As we have an early start in the morning to get to the Gunnison Sage Grouse blind, we had an early dinner at Ol' Miner Steakhouse where the beef proved to a tasty substitute for the popular trout dish that they ran out of.

Day 4 / April 11 - Waunita Hot Springs Lek; Blue Mesa Reservoir; Black Canyon of Gunnison; Fruitgrowers Orchards; Palisades Orchards; Coal Canyon

Rolling out of bed at 4.15am for our first lek of the trip, this being for Gunnison Sage Grouse, we followed Daniel (the Sisk-a-dee coordinator) to the Waunita Hot Springs lek arriving at 5am. Joining us in the blind were the VENT group which made for a cozy experience! Once we were settled in, the windows were opened at 5.15am and we were left to stare into the darkness and wait, listening to the babbling brook that runs in front of the blind and watching Venus rising. The temperature was 28 with no wind which made our 2 hr 45 minute stay very tolerable!

It would be 6am before we could make out any moving object along the fence line some 300 meters or more away. Half an hour later with a Coyote calling nearby it was light enough to see the inflated white chests and large exposed air sacs of these endangered Gunnison Sage Grouse. There were about half a dozen females around the main part of the lek along with two males. Scanning the fence line we could also make about a

couple more males dotted about, these being sub-ordinates, that we doing all they could to attract other females, but with little luck on this morning. Further away we could see another small group comprising 5 males. Through the scope we could easily see the the long dark filoplumes that are one of the features that separate this species from the larger Greater Sage Grouse, as it flicks its head at the end of its display.

At 6.45 6 birds flew away headed for large patches of sagebrush. As the sun rose at 7am over the hillside ridge beyond the lek the male Gunnison Sage Grouse tails that were erect and fanned out glowed through the sunlight. The last female left the lek at 7.30 leaving 3 males to periodically display as they had no audience. One by one they took flight for several hundred meters and landed a little closer giving us our best looks. Other species that we saw or heard included American Tree Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Horned Lark, Western Meadowlark and a dark morph Rough-legged Hawk. Much to our relief, following a long time sitting in the blind and with the 'chicken' activity having died down, the last bird left at 7.50 allowing us to leave the blind and head for a late breakfast.

Our drive continued towards the western part of the state. A stop at a large section of open water along the Blue Mesa Reservoir held hundreds of waterfowl with Wood Duck and Cinnamon Teal being new ducks for our list. Five Clarke's Grebes showed well and a handful of Black-necked Stilts could be seen feeding along the edge of the far shoreline. An area of sagebrush at Stevens Creek produced a Vesper Sparrow and a pair of Sage Thrashers including one displaying, lifting its wings up to flash a brighter underside.

The Black Canyon of Gunnison is just another one of the many scenic part of Colorado, as well as being one of the more reliable spots to look for Dusky Grouse within the Gambels oak and sagebrush. Slate-colored Fox Sparrows were signing away on this balmy late morning. A Spotted Towhee was bathing in a roadside puddle. We stopped and listened when I thought I heard a Dusky Grouse. I could never hear it again but Randy kept telling us he could. His hearing had to be exceptional. Walking between patches of snow, wet grass and around shrubs, we came across a male Dusky Grouse slowly wandering about. He eventually worked his way under an oak tree and sat giving all of us a wonderful view of our fourth 'chicken' of the trip - White-tailed Ptarmigan, Scaled Quail and Gunnison's Sage Grouse being the other three. We had our picnic lunch on the back deck of the visitors center watching Ravens, a Cooper's Hawk and two migrating Northern Harriers. At the overlook, with yet another jaw-dropping sight, several White-throated Swifts could be seen zipping around a pinnacle below us.

Bob liked it that I announced that Lewis's Woodpecker was next, making it sound like it was certain! Luckily at Fruitgrowers Orchards four Lewis's Woodpeckers put on a fine display as they flew between two favoured cottonwood trees.

As we headed towards Grand Junction a stop at the 142 bridge and adjacent ponds produced a Black Phoebe and we added Ruddy Duck to our ever growing list of waterfowl.

Driving through the Palisades Orchards, which had many of the fruiting trees already beginning to leaf out, Anne pointed out that she liked the look of a certain brush pile and sure enough we found a Gambel's Quail near the top checking out his surroundings.

With luck being our side today our last stop would be at Coal Canyon to look for that often elusive Chukar. We soon found several Black-throated Sparrows sitting up singing away on what was now an 80 degree afternoon. Rock Wrens were singing from atop rocks (what else!) and a Loggerhead Shrike was a good find. I picked up the silhouette on a very close ridge line and while we all got looks of varying degrees it was very skittish and took off and we could not relocate it. Beyond the upper gate Wild Horses could be seen feeding along the what was a much depleted river bed. I was watching a Rock Squirrel scurrying around and caught sight of neon turquoise on a rock. It was a beautiful Collared Lizard seen well in the scope. As we watching the lizard Chukars began calling and soon we could see one standing on rock not far from the entrance road. We worked

our way back to the road and had the best and longest looks that we have ever had on these trips at this long ago introduced game bird.

We celebrated our excellent day having a surprisingly good spaghetti dinner at Pantuso Ristorante.

Day 5 / April 12 - Fravert Pond; Rio Blanco Lake; Steamboat Springs

Having succeeded in seeing the Chukar yesterday we were able to head north and spend more time looking for new species. The first one was along Rte 70, a Bald Eagle on a nest. Stopping at Fravert Pond in Rifle, from the elevated promontory we could look down upon a multitude of Ring-necked Ducks along with Cinnamon Teal and a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Topping this stop off was a beaver the first of several new mammals for our trip list. A nice surprise was finding a Pheasant, our seventh 'chicken' crossing the main road.

Heading through pinyon country in the hopes of finding Clark's Nutcracker we succeeded, after watching a Townsend's Solitaire, when two birds flew over us, their characteristic shape and wing beats very evident. As we wound our way between canyon hills the valley floor was dotted with cattle ranches and small ponds. A Golden Eagle circled over the road and we could soon see why, there was a White-tailed Prairie Dog town, not far off the road. In spite of being a good distance away from a major reservoir we encountered a Bald Eagle but I guess the lure of waterfowl on these smaller bodies of water was enough for it to check out.

Being a calm morning with 60 degree temperatures there were a handful of fisherman in boats on Rio Blanco lake but that did not seem to deter the birds. Three dozen Franklin Gulls were flying up and down the lake no doubt finding many insects to eat over the water. A lone Western Grebe showed well allowing us to see and compare the field marks to a Clark's. Four Eared Grebes could be seen together near the water's edge. A flotilla of American White Pelicans made for a wonderful sight set against the golden colours of the reeds. A pair of Ospreys were nearby at their nest on a telephone pole with one of them carrying a fish. There would be a closer view of a Yellow-headed Blackbird as it displayed from the top of a bush, this one having a bald patch on its crown!

By late morning we found a mom and pop coffee shop in Meeker and took a break to enjoy assorted beverages. Continuing on towards Craig a pair of Sandhill Cranes at a roadside pond was a delight for the photographers. Interestingly along a stretch of the road there were pairs of Ground Squirrels playing Russian roulette. A Pronghorn sitting down in the middle of a field and two Yellow-bellied Marmots added to our ever growing mammal list.

Once in the Steamboat Springs area we visited a private property to see if there were any Sharp-tailed Grouse around and sure enough about two dozen birds were on or nearby their lek. With most of the snow having melted they blended in perfectly amongst the short grasses. A pair of courting Sandhill Cranes were dancing, bugling and flying around us making this an idyllic setting. Along the patch of oaks that borders the lek we noticed a Porcupine in the tree. We were able to approach and watch in astonishment as it made calculated slow movements with its feet, much like a sloth, in order to move. The large pads on their paws and long claws were reminiscent of bears.

The scenic drive along the Elk River produced an American Dipper on a calmer section of the raging waters, while feeders in Clark held a plethora of Evening Grosbeaks as well as a couple of Cassin's Finches. We finished a very successful and enjoyable day with a Band-tailed Pigeon in a Steamboat Springs neighbourhood.

For dinner the group opted for Mexican at the Fiesta Jalisco, being the finest in Steamboat it did not disappoint at all. The margaritas hit the spot and each of us chose a different delicious entree.

Day 6 / April 13 - Steamboat Springs; Coalmont lek; Walden Pond; Moose Creek Visitors Center

With a winter storm advisory in progress we anticipated the worst but were very happy to have a break in the precipitation once we arrived at the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. The temperature was in the low 30's with a very light rain to start out with, and no snow on the ground. A pair of Sandhill Cranes could be seen courting along the edge of the sagebrush and providing additional sound to the dawn soundtrack.

For an hour we got to watch over two dozen Sharp-tailed males go crazy anytime one of the three females ventured anywhere near them. Most males were paired off against each other, laying down, then when the moment seemed right to them, standing up and going in a circle with heads bowed down, tails up, wings outstretched and bowed, stomping their feet before chasing its rival into submission. Their yellow-orange combs and purple tympani very obvious. This activity would die down for periods of varying lengths then commence again with the sound of feet stomping, tails rattling and various softer coos and clucks. The main part of the lek was within an area of sparse grass about a foot tall, but when the activity got buzzing the white tails of the males were very visible. In the short grass surrounding the main lek subordinated males held court and very much participating in trying to attract a female.

Working our way back into Steamboat Springs we stopped for a wet dark morph Swainson's Hawk on a telegraph pole. In town we picked up our lunch at Safeway and after checking out of our hotel we began our drive to Walden. The forecast continue to say snow and blizzard conditions but the drive was not bad and any recent snow had not settled on the warm roads.

Once over Rabbit Ears this section of the North Park always seems to be very productive raptor wise. Red-tails, Swainson's, Rough-legged Hawks and several Golden Eagles we either perched roadside or in flight close by. Stopping to check on the condition of the Greater Sage Grouse lek we managed to see the head of one male above the sagebrush before he hunkered down upon sighting a Golden Eagle. This would also be the first time that we had seen Horned Larks on the trip, numbering in the dozens.

The big ponds around Walden were mostly frozen with any waterfowl filling the small roadside marshes. Pintail was new for the trip and there would be many Canvasback, Lesser Scaup and Green-winged Teal.

After lunch we headed to the Moose Creek Visitors Center. By now the winds had picked up, visibility was limited and the snow was beginning to blow across the road. For the first time I can recall Pine Grosbeaks were not at the feeders. In fact none of the locations that I usually find them at had any this year. Instead, a large flock of Evening Grosbeaks were around and the seed on the ground attracted many "Gray-headed" Junco. There was also an Oregon and a Rocky Mountain subspecies. A pair of Cassin's Finches along with Red-winged Blackbirds rounded out the feeder birds.

Michael O'Brien and his VENT group had mentioned that they had just seen a couple of McCown's Longspurs on the edge of the road less than half a mile away, so that would be our next stop. The winter storm had obviously forced these migrating birds down and they were feeding on grit or whatever they could find along the edge of the snow and tarmac. Returning back to Walden we would come across several more including a flock of a dozen that held a young male Chestnut-collared Longspur. At 9000' in evergreen and aspen habitat, this is certainly not where one would ever expect to see them!

By mid afternoon it was clear to us that the weather had gotten to the stage that we would be better off off the road, so we made our way back to the motel for an early end to the day. A good move as we would have an early start in the morning to see the Greater Sage Grouse on their lek.

The River Rocks Cafe in Walden was most grateful that three bird groups, Field Guides, VENT and Wildside Nature Tours were patronizing them this evening, but then again it is the best this small rural town has to offer!

Day 7 / April 14 - Coalmont lek; Windy Gap Reservoir; Red Rocks; Beebe Draw; Loloff Reservoir

By 5.15am we were at the Coalmont lek. The temperature read minus 8 degrees F! There was a crisp layering of snow covering the ground and surrounding sagebrush with a full moon shining brightly, lighting up the eight male Greater Sage Grouse that were already on the lek. Another seven were within a hundred meters of the center of the lek.

As it got light we could see females stationed in the surrounding sagebrush, who along with some of subordinate males, eventually would make their way towards the dominant males. The younger males would of course keep their distance for fear of being driven off by more experienced males. The females, which totaled about 20, would mingle together around the two strutting alpha males.

There were twice as many males, spread out over about 80 meters. The males display is an endless slow measured strut, pausing to inflate their yellow-lime green air sacs that protrude out from a puffed out white chest. Their beautifully patterned tails are fanned, they drop their wings and swish them forward, flick their long thin black filoplumes over the top of their head, and culminate with a low '*pop-pop*' sound. This ritual goes on and on throughout the morning hours that the females are around. From the females point of view all attention was on the two dominate males. One of them got to mate with two females. It is certainly possible that over the course of many days he would be the only one to do all the mating. Once mated the females leave the open lek for the sagebrush, where they will raise their young by themselves.

We would witness aggression between two males when a rival male encroached upon another's small territory. They would go after each other with their wings. It is vicious, and the sound of wings slapping each other is loud, and could easily cause damage. After a few 'hits' they get the hint. Exhausted they settle down to rest, before separating.

A light morph Rough-legged Hawk flushed about 90% of the birds, but it was only about 20 minutes before they all worked their way back to the center of the lek. Just before 8am, a juvenile Bald Eagle was spotted flying towards the lek, and even though it was a good distance away, the Sage Grouse certainly noticed it, and all of them took flight, ending one the most magnificent avian shows.

Following a hearty breakfast at Moose Creek Cafe with our friends from the other two groups, and gracious help from Megan serving the coffee, we had a lot of ground to cover as we crossed passes and the continental divide for a final time on our way to the eastern plains. As luck would have it the dire weather prediction never materialized on our route, and though the evergreen trees and willow bottomlands were covered in snow the roads were all passable.

Windy Gap Reservoir was covered in ice so the waterfowl were utilizing the open water in the river leading to it. From our vantage point the show was dominated by a hundred Barrow's Goldeneye swimming below us. What a wonderful show with a few Common Goldeneye amongst them for comparison.

It was easy to deviate slightly off our route and visit Red Rocks on the Front Range. We had hoped to find the Prairie Falcons but only had a circling Peregrine. The feeders at the Trading Post held Western Scrub Jay, Spotted Towhee, White-breasted Nuthatch along with Dark-eyed Juncos.

Once in the eastern plains, our first chance at looking for shorebirds would be at Beebe Draw. On our way we passed the numerous oil 'dinosaurs' that dot these agricultural fields in which Randy spotted a Pheasant. Amongst the Black-tailed Prairie Dog towns Burrowing Owls could be seen standing guard over a burrow. A male Northern Harrier quartered a field providing excellent views. Yellow-headed Blackbirds were a welcome sight and we would soon find 7 Wilson's Snipes, both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and a Great Egret.

Loloff Reservoir was teeming with gulls, waterfowl and shorebirds. It is always a delight to see breeding plumage American Avocets and several were close by feeding in the water. Our first Baird's Sandpiper could be seen on the far shore. A pleasant surprise was a Marbled Godwit working along the near shoreline, and California Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls were side by side for comparison.

After checking into our hotel in Greeley we went for an excellent pizza and beer just down the road at the Old Chicago.

Day 8 / April 15 - Glenmere Park; Pawnee Grasslands; Wray; Bonny Lake SP

This would be our last normal morning wake up, with breakfast being at 6.30am. A short distance from our hotel in Greeley is Glenmere Park, a good place to see nesting Black-crowned Night-herons, and we were not disappointed with many around the small pond and on its island. A pair of Wood Ducks took flight as we walked around and a Blue Jay, an eastern species that reaches the edge of its western range in the plains of Colorado, was moving around the neighbourhood. Two Cackling Geese and a Snow Goose, where a surprise, and one wonders whether they were 'real ones' when they are encountered in a town pond! Our only Belted Kingfisher of the trip showed up, noisily, as we were about to leave.

The remainder of the morning was spent working our way through the Pawnee National Grasslands. Two dozen Long-billed Curlews were flushed by a Swainson's Hawk and flew across the road in front of us, landing in a field a good distance away. We were very lucky to have seen McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspur earlier in the trip as there were very few migrants to be found on this morning other than a Merlin, a Sage Thrasher, a Loggerhead Shrike and four dozen Long-billed Curlews! A Ferruginous Hawk was seen on a nest and a couple of Great Horned Owls flushed from a coral as we drove by.

At Crow Campground a Hermit Thrush must have been very happy that we flushed a Sharp-shinned Hawk that was lying in wait for him, unbeknown to us at the time. Randy was thrilled when we found a pair of Mountain Plovers close to the road, including one displaying by shaking its tail

The raptor show continued on our journey eastwards towards Wray with Great Horned Owls, Red-tailed Hawk on a nest, Rough-legged Hawks, Swainson's Hawks, many American Kestrels and a Prairie Falcon that was gone as soon as we spotted it fly by. At Bonny Lake, now known as Republican SWA, the water that once held a multitude of waterfowl has now been diverted to Kansas, so waterfowl were non-existent, but we added Sharp-shinned Hawk and Long-eared Owl.

On the outskirts of Wray a flock of Wild Turkeys had a tom in full display and we found a Harris's Sparrow in with a number of White-crowned Sparrows on the road leading to the Fish Hatchery.

Following our orientation at the Wray Museum for tomorrow's Greater Prairie Chicken excursion, we had dinner at the very popular 4th & Main where we all enjoyed a superior Blackened Fish Taco.

Day 9 / April 16 - Kitzmiller Ranch; Thurston Reservoir; Comanche Grassland; Lamar Woods

At 4.30am we boarded the school bus in Wray that would take us to the Greater Prairie Chicken lek on the Kitzmiller Ranch. After a 20 minute journey, and 15 minutes to get settled into the blind, the windows were lifted open. Though the temperature was a balmy 44 degrees the winds are blowing a steady 20mph, swirling into the blind! Brrrr!

Though there were not as many birds of the lek as in previous years, it was a brilliant show. 15 males were doing all they could to get the attention of 3 females. The sounds of males booming (imagine blowing into a glass coke bottle), cooing and clacking filled the air. Males would bow with raised tails and pinnae, stamping

their feet and they moved towards a female. They would be relentless, with half a dozen males in the center of the lek getting the most attention. We had to be quick to see a mating - it is over before you know it - the female crouches, the dominant male mounds, the female gets up and shakes herself, and then slowly wanders off pausing to feed along the way! There was one subordinate male close to the blind jumping up and down to be as visible as possible, making as much noise as he could, and occasionally deciding to chase his nearest rival away. Maybe next year he'll get closer to the main part of the lek.

In the distance a pair of Burrowing Owls could be seen standing over their burrows. Western Meadowlarks and Horned Larks were often heard and occasionally seen as they worked their way around the vast open landscape.

All the females had left the lek by 7.15 and shortly after we got back on the school bus and were driven to the Kitzmiller Grazing Association ranch house for breakfast. The delightful and engaging Robin and Russ Seward do a wonderful job, feeding us with pancakes, eggs, the very best bacon any of us have ever tasted and coffee. This is the 21st year that the Wray Chamber of Commerce and the Kitzmiller Grazing Association have put on this wonderful package tour, and the 15th year we have been part of it!

Four lekking 'chickens' down, one to go, and that would be in the south east corner of the state! It was a long drive south, through endless flat plains of winter wheat and arable stubble until we reached Thurston Reservoir. The wind was fierce blowing hard bringing up dust and making any distant scoping almost impossible. Luckily the shoreline was full of Baird's Sandpipers and three Snowy Plovers all doing their best to walk into the wind as they fed, making it easy for us to see them.

We picked up a fast food lunch in Lamar and continued south. Once we reached the Comanche Grasslands a fast leaking tire meant that we had to cut our time short and get it fixed, unfortunately the nearest place would be in Springfield, miles away. Sparrows were nonexistent but we did manage a Barn Owl before having to turn back.

At Lamar Community College Woods migrants continued to elude us and we only came up with Blue Jays! We googled the recommended restaurants in Lamar and the Thai Spicy Basil was rated as the best. Though it was not spicy nor able to produce anything with basil, it was adequate.

Day 10 / April 17 - Arena Dust Lek; John Martin Reservoir; Garden of the Gods

It would be an early rise for the last of our 'chicken' leks, the Lesser Prairie Chicken. With a steady rain falling we arrived in Holly at 4.30am to meet Fred and three other people who would join us this morning. Fred drove the school bus, that would act as our blind, a half hour further south to the lek. By the time we arrived the overnight rain and current steady drizzle made the tracks leading to the lek very slippery, leaving Fred a little concerned, but we made it!

At first light we could make out 3 birds hunkered down about 60 yards away. As the light got brighter and the rain began to dissipate 9 males were visible, but everyone of them was sitting down doing nothing! Was the rain affecting them? I would not have thought so, given that it was very light and the birds are hormonally driven to go through this yearly mating ritual. Was it because there were no females around? Possibly. Maybe the number of females that frequent this lek were few, and that those there had already mated? Either way we will never know, but in general it does not bode well for this species in Colorado.

On the way to breakfast at Fred and Norma's we stopped for Burrowing Owls, counting eight in a small prairie-dog town, and had a cooperative Ferruginous Hawk perched on a telephone pole.

After checking out of our motel in Lamar we began our journey back to Denver with a stop at John Martin Reservoir. Here we met biologist Duane who took us to see one of the 8 pairs of Piping Plovers that bred in Colorado. Two had just returned a few days earlier and we could see one along the stone edge of the reservoir within the extensive roped off breeding area. Driving around the north shore we encountered a flock of a dozen White-faced Ibis, both Western and Clark's Grebe, and a female Wilson's Phalarope. A lone Cattle Egret flew across the track just before we exited the reservoir.

It would be the mid afternoon before we reached the Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs. Anne soon found the Prairie Falcon sitting atop the Kissing Camels on what turned out to be a beautiful sunny day. It must have just been bathing as it was soaking wet. Below the male, we could see the small cave covered in white wash that they nest in. A Red-tailed Hawk and a Peregrine added to the raptor tally. Black-billed Magpies, Western Scrub Jays and White-throated Swifts were very common, and the singing Canyon Wren was eventually located near the top of one of the rock outcroppings. A fitting way to end the trip.

For our final evening together we enjoyed a marvelous meal at Ted's Montana Grill where several of us had pecan crusted trout - highly recommended! We reminisced about the shows that the chickens put on, Greater Sage Grouse, Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie Chicken being the favourite ones; the luck we had with the weather and seeing all three rosy-finch species given the fact that there were only about a dozen birds in all.