



## COLORADO "Chicken Odyssey" - April 6-16, 2016

Trip Report by Chris Brown, Photos by Adrian Binns

### Wednesday April 6, Day One

Over the course of Wednesday afternoon we collected our intrepid (and fun-loving!) group of birders from the Denver Airport. This made for a perfect opportunity to explore Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR on a lovely, if a bit windy, spring afternoon! After enjoying looks at Say's Phoebe and Desert Cottontail near the Visitor's Center we took a loop on the Wildlife Drive. Here we acclimated ourselves to some of the common bird species of the Front Range by enjoying the magpies, flickers and Western Meadowlarks which are ubiquitous on the eastern slope of the Rockies. We were also treated to American Bison, a somewhat ratty looking coyote, Black-tailed Prairie-dogs and Mule Deer; a quick stop at Piccadilly Road near the Airport gave us wonderful looks at a pair of Burrowing Owls! (right)



### Thursday April 7, Day Two

Our first full day was spent getting into position to watch Lesser Prairie-Chickens on their ritual dancing grounds, also known as a "lek." Due to the unfortunate state of Lesser PC's in Colorado, this year that means a trip to Western Kansas, near Dodge City.



Birding while on the move to the south east we stopped along the highway for scope views of Swainson's and nesting Ferruginous Hawks; we flushed up our first two chickens: a pair of pheasant and a pair of Scaled Quail; we had VERY satisfying scope views of Mountain Plovers (*left*); but the most hypnotizing moments were at Holbrook Reservoir, where on this choice, warm, uncharacteristically calm afternoon we found ourselves marveling at the display songs and dance of Western and Clark's Grebes. Otherworldly! At Lamar Community College we stumbled upon several scarce eastern breeders: Red-Bellied Woodpecker and Northern Cardinal and crossing into Kansas we had to split our attention between a close pair of nesting Swainson's Hawks and several newly-arrived Lark Buntings. After an excellent meal at a very authentic Mexican

restaurant in town we spent the night just outside Garden City, Kansas.

### Friday April 8, Day Three

Our group rises early for the hour drive to the Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek near Dodge City, Kansas. Arriving about an hour and a half before sunrise we are treated to calling Burrowing Owls right as we first open the van doors. As we stand patiently awaiting the light of day and the promise of the mercury climbing up the thermometer we can hear several Great-horned Owls calling around us. A Barn Owl flies by dangling its legs, and eventually another. Eventually daylight comes and two hundred yards to our south there are several male prairie-chickens hopping up and down, with their ear-like pinnae feathers making them look something like rabbits. We watch as the birds pop up past the tall grass here and there until a Northern Harrier comes and flushes them in various directions giving us good looks in flight. A Short-eared Owl flies by the area where the chickens had been, giving us our fourth owl species at this spot! With the help of



visiting birder Steve Hampton we are able to locate a second lek with more birds and better looks just up the road.



After viewing the prairie-chickens a bit longer we headed to Bonny Lake for lunch. Here we got our first good looks at Townsend's Solitaire, a lifer for several in the group! As we made our way into Wray, CO for our orientation to the Greater Prairie-Chicken leks we would visit in the morning, we stopped at Wray Fish Hatchery and Stalker Lake where we picked up Eastern Bluebirds, both Yellow- and Red-shafted Flickers, among the common western residents.

After dinner in Wray we went to our orientation from the Wray Chamber of Commerce and Colorado Parks and Wildlife on the topic of our visit to the Greater Prairie-Chicken lek in the morning. The lek is located on a massive working cattle ranch, and the ranchers are conscientious enough to move their herds from the leks area during the spring, giving the birds their space. They also work with the Chamber of Commerce, bringing in visitors on weekends mornings to view the bird's mating rites. This brings money into a small town on the edge of the Great Plains, gets the word out about conservation, and gives birders the best possible opportunity to see Greater Prairie-Chickens in a controlled manner which does not disturb the birds. The chickens have been using this lek for at least 130 years! We got some sleep before what we knew would be an exciting, if early, morning!

### **Saturday April 9, Day Four**

Our group joined other birders at the Wray Museum to board a school bus which would be our shuttle for the 20 minute drive from town to the Kitzmiller Grazing Association Ranch, north of town. We arrive at the lek in the dark and are ushered into a long viewing trailer, settle in and open the viewing windows. As the first hint of light peeks above the horizon you begin to hear it: an alien-sounding hoot, almost like the sound of someone blowing across a bottle.



This is the sound of the males arriving on the lek, and it is still too dark to see them. The sound continues in the dark as more and more males arrive. One wonders what uncertainty and fear early settlers on the plains might have felt the first time they were awoken by these foreign sounds, because the next thing that comes is an other-worldly cackle as the males begin to dance and quarrel. The dance is almost comical, with much stomping of feet, inflating of colorful air sacs and raising of ear-feathers! Birds turn



and flutter a foot into the air before plopping back to the ground. By-and-large the females do a good job of hiding just how impressed they are, but I guess the system works; a century ago prairie-chickens were on the brink of extinction, but today, thanks in no small part to ranchers like the Kitzmillers and town like Wray, we saw over fifty at the lek we visited! Breakfast at the ranch is always fantastic, the bacon always the best anyone has ever had, but an early arriving Northern Parula in one of the cottonwood trees near the house was a new bird for the overall trip list of 16 years!

En route to Cañon City we stopped outside Arriba and got decent looks at McCown's Longspur. Chestnut-Collared, however, was more difficult; we only heard them and saw them in flight here. Also in the area were Thirteen-lined Ground-squirrels, Ferruginous Hawks (*right*) and Mountain Plovers. On our way through Colorado Springs several of us got on a Chihuahuan Raven before it took off, and birding the Desert Hawk Golf Course in Pueblo West gave us southeast Colorado specialties like Scaled Quail and Curve-billed Thrasher. After dinner several of us decided to visit Cañon City River Walk where we heard one Western Screech-Owl calling in the distance.



### **Sunday April 10, Day Five**

This morning we had a day's respite from pre-dawn wake ups. After a leisurely breakfast we stopped by Valco Ponds on our way out of town. Along with a decent selection of waterfowl we found two Black Phoebe's, which are localized in this part of the state, and a Harris's Sparrow which had likely spent the winter in the huge brush pile in which it was still lurking. A stop along tunnel drive produced Say's and Eastern Phoebes, completing the phoebe roundup for the day, a first for me.



At Temple Canyon State Park the birdlife took on a decidedly southwestern flavor: Chihuahuan Raven, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, White-throated Swift, Canyon Towhee, and Juniper Titmouse and more in the canyon habitat with Pinyon Jay (*left*) and Clark's Nutcracker just down the road. Stops in the Maysville/Salida area produced our first Stellar's Jays and Cassin's Finches of the trip, and a very helpful employee at the Monarch Pass Visitor Center informed us of "some kind of special woodpeckers" that frequent the aspen grove around back. She had good intel, because there they were, Three-toed Woodpeckers, just as advertised! We are always looking for the most up-to-date information as possible, and it sometimes comes when you least expect it! A quick stop at a promising-looking creek in Almont did not disappoint, as it produced great scope-looks at nest-building American

Dippers, always a highlight! A quick spin around the town of Crested Butte gave us great looks at our first Pine Grosbeaks of the tour.

### **Monday April 11, Day Six**

When we have to be up before the sun to get to a lek I often say we are up "dark and early". We get into the van in the dark, maybe eat a granola bar and drink a cup of coffee in the dark (breakfast sometimes has to wait until after we get back from the leks) and some would argue that I look like I got dressed in the dark. But no matter. This gives us the best opportunity to get into place before the birds can see us, and it keeps us from disturbing them.

We get to the viewing area about four hundred yards away from the Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek at Wuanita Hot Springs an hour before first light and position ourselves in the viewing blind. At dawn on the ridgeline we can see several males begin their courtship dance. They hold their spiky tails up and fanned open, bristle philoplumes on their napes and inflate air sacs on their breasts the color of a hard-boiled egg's yolk. Their strange display goes on for about ninety minutes before slowing to a halt, at which point we are allowed to exit the blind. Excitedly we hurry out, reliving the moments aloud to each other; some talking about the grouse, some about the fly-by Rough-legged Hawk, all preparing for a small celebration:



the Gunnison Sage-Grouse is a lifer for almost all of us and is ABA area bird number 700(!) for participant Janis Cadwallader! Mimosas to celebrate! Congrats again Janis!



After a quick stop for Sage Thrasher we headed to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison to look for Dusky Grouse. We were in no way disappointed, as after a bit of searching Adrian came up with a male displaying mere feet away. This bird is all woofer and no tweeter. The boom of a Dusky Grouse (*below left*) is so low-pitched and resonant that at short range one feels it as much as hears it. Incredible beyond words, this experience was hard to verbalize even for our verbose group. I'll always remember the stunned silence of this normally gregarious group after watching something that moved them.



After lunch we continued west towards Grand Junction. Our route took us through the many orchards and vineyards of the Grand Valley, orchards and vineyards that make perfect habitat for the unique Lewis's Woodpecker (*above right*). We enjoyed a comfortable half hour watching these gorgeously-colored birds at a nest site on private property, thanks to one homeowner who is particularly hospitable to both the birds and to birders.

Our next stop was Coal Canyon Wild Horse Area where we were treated to scope views of Chukar, a pair of soaring Golden Eagles, Black-throated Sparrow and Rock Wrens, as well as the local band of five mustangs which call Coal Canyon home. They are led by a white and black paint called Medicine Cloud, right, who is something of a local celebrity, and an absolutely gorgeous horse.

Our final birding stop of the day was at Connected Lakes State Park where we were successful in finding Gambel's Quail near a nest I had found while scouting for the trip. Today was a wildly successful day, beautifully representative of the American West: the skies were big and bright, the people friendly, the scenery and birds cripplingly spectacular.



## Tuesday April 12, Day Seven

After spending the night in Grand Junction this morning we were able to wake up a bit later, as we had no lek to visit at dawn. We did some roadside birding as we made our way towards Steamboat Springs. One roadside pullout proved to be a fantastic show: a pair of golden eagles being escorted through the area by the local Clark's Nutcrackers (*right*), while White-throated Swifts circled the area. A stop for lunch at the Rio Blanco State Wildlife Area provided good looks at breeding plumaged Eared Grebes and Bonaparte's Gulls, and an American Pipit foraged along the lakeshore.



On our way into Steamboat Springs we detoured to our Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. While we chatted about what to expect in the morning we noted the local Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Sandhill Cranes, and a lovely dark-morph Swanson's Hawk. Driving to the main road we even saw a few Sharp-Tailed Grouse, but we knew the real show would be the next morning. We called it a day after visiting Clark Resort and the Evening Grosbeaks which visit the feeders there.

## Wednesday April 13, Day Eight

Sharp-tailed Grouse (*below*) are one of the smallest chickens we seek on our tour. Only the Lesser Prairie-Chicken is smaller, and barely. Their lek holds a slightly more frenetic energy than the others. The birds are more densely packed on the lek, and they move much more. The birds hoot and howl. They stomp feet in a softly-thumping blur while their stiff tail feathers vibrate against each other, lending a wind-up-toy like rattle. Then all at once, they stop. They pause in a sort of stand-off, and it seems like no one so much as takes a breath. Then, in uncanny unison, they pick up where they left off. Like musical chairs for birds, with music only they can hear. It really is something you need to see to believe.



We then drove "Raptor Alley" towards the High Plains near Walden. This stretch of road held one Prairie Falcon, Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagles, every plumage-type Swanson's Hawk, and is flat and infrequently traveled, which allows for safe stopping. We checked out the Greater Sage-Grouse lek we would visit the next day and had views of the grouse and at Sage Thrashers who make their homes in the Sagebrush Sea.

After checking into the hotel and eating lunch in Walden we visited Walden Reservoir where we enjoyed a variety of waterfowl including Redheads, Canvasbacks, Ruddy Ducks, all three teal, as well as Franklin's and California Gull and American White Pelican. Some of us were even lucky enough to glimpse a Mink as it crossed the road.

Everyone in the group got good looks at Red-naped Sapsuckers, newly arrived for spring, near State Forest State Park Moose Visitor Center. After dinner in Walden a few intrepid folks headed for the hills and heard two or three Boreal Owls calling up near the Moose Visitor Center, although they would not allow themselves to be seen. That was a nice way to wrap up a very nice day on the High Sagebrush Plains.



## Thursday April 14, Day Nine



We started the day a bit before sunrise at a Greater Sage-Grouse (*above*) lek near Coalmont, Colorado. The grouse strut with tail feathers lifted and wings drooped. Like their smaller relatives the Gunnison Sage-Grouse they inflate large yellow air sacs with they then bounce off of their chests, creating a popping sound. It is a sound like no other, and the males display against each other in an epic stare-down, which occasionally results in a flap of wings, chests pushed against each other's until one concedes ground. At one point all the birds were flushed to the south side of the road by a Golden Eagle, but they eventually retook both sides. We stayed watching this scene at close range until the males slowed to a halt, at which time we moved on.

On the road up to Loveland Pass we picked up Gray Jay and Prairie Falcon and stopped briefly for great looks at male and female Barrow's Goldeneye. Another quick stop produced Red Crossbills and Brown-capped Rosy-Finches. Of course this was just our warmup for the final target chicken: White-tailed Ptarmigan, easily the most easily-missed chicken on our hit-list.

After some time spent scoping the mountainsides from the Loveland Pass parking lot it became apparent that a new angle was needed so in groups we spread out in search of the football-sized white birds. I decided to go uphill along the ridgeline trail and look around a corner. Walking along the ridge I looked down and saw small tracks in the remaining snow. The tracks lead from one patch of bare ground to the next and were shaped like small turkey tracks. I followed for about forty yards before looking up at the ridgeline where they led. There they were, watching me over the ridge, bodies hidden on the other side. A pair of White-tailed Ptarmigans (*below*). I excitedly garbled something, unintelligible even to me into my two-way radio and ran back to the main group, down the mountain 120 yards. Yes, ran. At 12,000 feet.



By the time I reached everyone I was too out of breath to tell them anything. I simply tried to get the birds in the scope. Unable to do so I mustered a "follow me" and headed back up to where I had been. Here we set up the scopes and had fantastic views on the pair sitting huddled out of the first winds of the coming spring snow. Just like that we had achieved our goal. We had seen all of our target Colorado "chickens".

As we descended below tree-line we stopped at the aptly named Bighorn Sheep Overlook, where we had a good sized ram lounging on a rocky outcropping. Genesee Park was a nice study of one of my favorite habitats: ponderosa foothills. Characteristic birds we saw here included more Red Crossbills and a Williamson's Sapsucker. Elk Burgers at Tommyknocker Brewery in Idaho Springs to celebrate having swept the Colorado Chickens!



### Friday April 15, Day Ten

Today is our final full day of birding in Colorado, and although the weather has been as beautiful as spring can be in the Rockies, the forecast has soured a bit. There will be snow in our future but the forecast is very fluid. We are lucky to have missed almost nothing, so we took our time and birded the Front Range of the Rockies at a leisurely pace today.



We finally ran into a handful of Violet-green Swallows and had killer looks at a perched Prairie Falcon (*above left*) at Red Rocks Park and Amphitheater this morning and then much more satisfying views of McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs, the latter thanks to a Pronghorn (*above right*), at the Pawnee National Grasslands this afternoon.

### Saturday April 16, Day Eleven: Snow coming! 3 to 4 feet! to the airport by noon!

The forecast for today, and for the foreseeable future for that matter, is for snow! Three to four feet, of the white stuff. Those whose flights have been cancelled are set up in the airport hotel, and those who are able to fly out today are at the airport by noon. We say our goodbyes, exchange contact information and head to our gates. The trip has been an incredible success, and other than the final few hours the weather has been unusually cooperative. We had a fun, easy-going group that got along from the very beginning. It made for a very enjoyable and most memorable week! Thanks to all of you!

