



COLORADO “Chicken Odyssey” - TRIP REPORT April 5-15, 2017

By Chris Brown

Day One, April 5, 2017

Early April is Chicken season. Today I collected our band of travelers and set off west in search of Colorado’s varied birdlife. From the Denver airport area we drove up into the foothills. Our first stop was at Red Rocks Park and Amphitheater near Morrison, Colorado to familiarize ourselves with some of the more common series we can expect to see regularly over the coming days. We picked up Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, Black-billed Magpie, Spotted Towhee, and the Gray-headed subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco and our first Elk of the trip. We also found a loafing Peregrine Falcon near the amphitheater, but the real star was a Prairie Falcon preening atop it’s rocky home.

After a light lunch at The Cow Eatery in Morrison we continued west to Genesee Mountain Park, where we hoped to find birds more closely associated with foothills habitat. We were treated to a trio of singing finches: Pine Siskins, House Finches and two heard-only Cassin’s Finches. Also present were our first Pygmy Nuthatches and Mountain Chickadees, but the real target here was Williamson’s Sapsucker. We did not leave disappointed; after a few minutes of waiting and hoping a male Williamson’s Sapsucker eventually appeared at the sap wells on a nearby tree. A few minutes later he was joined by a female and we watched the pair together for a few excited minutes!

From Genesee we continued west to Loveland Pass in hopes of finding a late afternoon ptarmigan, but the elements had other thoughts. The pass was brutally cold with winds of about 35 miles per hour, and the the blowing snow and shaking tripod made scanning with a scope futile, as did the shivering caused by the cutting wind. Tomorrow we will make a strong effort for this bird, although the forecast doesn’t call for much change. As a backup we checked feeders in a nearby town, turning up our first Pine Grosbeaks of the trip! We spent the night in Georgetown and will try again for the ptarmigans first thing in the morning.

Day Two, April 6, 2017

Made cautiously optimistic by the seemingly mellower weather we kept our fingers crossed as we headed up Loveland Pass. As we neared the summit we all breathed a collective sigh of relief: the weather was actually quite pleasant: seasonably cold, but comfortable enough in the sun and out of the wind. Ptarmigan searching, however, happens out in the open. As we scanned the snowy mountainside talus fields and willow clubs we were visited by a single Horned Lark and two Brown-capped Rosy-Finches, always a possibility here, 12,000 feet above sea level-but never a sure thing! After about two hours of scanning and searching a single, crowing White-tailed Ptarmigan flew into view from around a slope, landed in plain sight and began to feed, offering great scope views to all. We enjoyed this bird, still all-white in winter plumage on the all-white backdrop of early April above the tree-line, a bird at once perfectly camouflaged and somehow also wonderfully clear to us observing it one hundred fifty yards away.

After having our fill of the ptarmigan we continued west, passing a herd of bighorn sheep along the roadside, to feeders that had recently been visited by Rosy-Finches. While stopped to look at a Pine Grosbeak someone noticed a Brown-capped Rosy-Finch at a nearby feeder. And then another. And more, until it became apparent that there were about 250 Rosy-Finches. Almost all were Brown-capped, with a few Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches of the Hepburn's subspecies with much gray on the head, and even two Black Rosy-Finches mixed in. As we watched the Rosy-Finches, sometimes swirling around us in flight, we were also visited by the likes of a Gray Jay. A Stellar's Jay flew past the group, scolding as it went. A squadron of American White Pelicans floated by, surprising everyone just a bit by being up at such an elevation; we are standing at over 9,000 feet. What a fantastic spot!

From here we headed south towards the pinyon-juniper country around Canon City, making brief stop to view a herd of pronghorn antelope and a few Mountain Bluebirds. We see our first Gunnison's Prairie Dog, the smallest prairie dog species. Upon arriving at the outskirts of town we made a quick stop at Tunnel Drive where we added Bufflehead, Common Merganser, and Lesser Scaup among other species of waterfowl, and our first White-crowned Sparrow popped up in a nearby hedgerow. Our final stop was at Brush Hollow Reservoir, which produced Western Bluebirds, a singing Juniper Titmouse and an inquisitive family of Pinyon Jays coming to check us out. A dinner of delicious, very authentic Mexican food at El Caporal in Canon City was a great way to end an exciting first full day of Wildside Nature Tour's eighteenth Chicken Odyssey!

Day Three, April 7, 2017

Although we had a relatively short distance to travel today it was a very busy day. We began with a morning stroll around the Valco Ponds near Canon City. In addition to the common waterfowl species we also picked up our first Black Phoebe of our trip. Next we visited Temple Canyon in search of additional pinyon-juniper specialists, and were not disappointed. After scope-looks at a singing Bewick's Wren perched atop a juniper tree. Canyon Towhee sang nearby and offered scope views as he sat atop the rim of a small ravine. Continuing along we came to the spectacular Royal Gorge where we got brief looks at Townsend's Solitaire, but the views here, where the canyon is over 1,000 feet deep, were the real highlight.

Heading west we found ourselves in Salida, and a lunch stop at Sands Lake State Wildlife Area. This small lake was a bit slower than usual, but we still picked up Great-tailed Grackle and our first American Dipper of the tour under a nearby bridge. Also present were a pair of Common Goldeneye which we watched as the male threw his head backward against his back in a display for the nearby female. From here we went up drastically in elevation and a stop at Monarch Pass produced a pair of American Three-toed Woodpecker, a new bird for almost everyone. After a stop at the Waunita Gunnison's Sage-Grouse lek for a brief orientation about the next morning's visit, we had at least one more important goal for today: to get everyone better looks at Black and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches. Our best opportunity in the area was a nearby ski resort, so that's where we went. After driving the streets and looking for feeders we headed up uphill, and were rewarded: we found several feeders with medium-sized flocks of rosy-finches of all three species, and after a few minutes of study, each of us was able to pick out the Gray-crowned and Black Rosy-Finches from the ever-shifting flock. On our way back into Gunnison we checked a likely-looking clump of evergreens but were unable to turn up a Red-naped Sapsucker. Consolation prizes were a roosting Great Horned Owl and close looks at "red-shafted" Northern Flickers, before an early dinner and bed. Our first lek experience would begin well before sunrise.

Day Four, April 8, 2017

We were met early this morning by two student representatives from the wildlife biology department at Western State Colorado University who volunteer as interpreters at the blind overlooking the Waunita Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek. After a brief orientation we drove out to the

lek. Arriving in the dark we waited patiently and quietly for the birds, which would be on a distant ridgeline. While we waited we heard the winnowing of a couple Wilson's Snipe, and the distant bugle of a Sandhill Crane or two. Eventually the first rays of sun appeared, as did the Gunnison Sage-Grouse. We took our time familiarizing ourselves with the distant strutting displays of the males, smaller than the Greater Sage-Grouse, and very active on the leks, chasing each other back and forth. At one point an unseen predator, likely a coyote flushed the whole group of 12 or so birds directly towards our blind. The birds passed by and offered an interesting view of this endangered species.

Next we visited Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, another one of Colorado's most scenic parks. Our main target here, besides a welcome lunch, was Dusky Grouse. There was no way to guess that we would have one of these subtly beautiful creatures in full display just feet from us. Many times this bird was within the minimum focal distance of my 400mm camera lens, so I was forced to take cell phone photos. A great problem to have. Stopping in likely-looking habitat, we found a singing Sage Thrasher proclaiming his dominance of this patch of sagebrush to all in earshot.

From the Gunnison area we hit the road and headed northwest towards Grand Junction, picking up our first Golden Eagle of the trip and making a stop in appropriate habitat yielded Sage Thrasher. At a private residence we had great looks at unique Lewis's Woodpeckers, found locally in the orchards and vineyards along the confluence of the Gunnison and Colorado Rivers. Our final target species of the day, Gambel's Quail gave good looks near a staked-out spot. We spent the night in Grand Junction on the arid Colorado Plateau, a very unique region.

Day Five, April 9, 2017

This is always an exciting day on our tour. The unique Colorado Plateau, a 130,000 square mile comprising the Colorado River watershed in parts of Colorado, Utah, Arizona and Nevada. This physiographic region is home to many species which can be found nowhere else in Colorado. We began the day in Coal Canyon where we added Chukar as well as Rock and Canyon Wrens and Black-throated Sparrow, and a singing Loggerhead Shrike sitting out in the open. The non-birding highlight of Coal Canyon, aside from stunning scenery is the resident band of wild horses led by stallion Medicine Bow, a handsome brown and white paint. A family group of Pinyon Jays escorted us back to the van.

Tracking northeast towards Steamboat Springs we came across a Bald Eagle nest along the Yampa River. Scanning one of the many small reservoirs near our route produced the first Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Cinnamon Teal of the trip. Another reservoir held migrants in the forms of Bonaparte's Gull and Common Loon, a species which was new for the all-time trip list! As we were scoping the loon and gull a light snow began to fall and we decided to head for lower elevations along our route to Steamboat Springs and our timing was perfect to be out of the hills for the worst of the spring storm. Along the way we picked up Clark's Nutcracker and more Townsend's Solitaires. After dinner we settled in to rest up for an early morning at our Sharp-tailed Grouse lek!

Day Six, April 10, 2017

It was a chilly start with this morning with temperatures near freezing as we arrived at the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. Lucky for us there was almost no wind to chill us or to dampen the mechanical pitter-patter of two dozen dancing males. The display of this small grouse is highly engaging and lots of fun to watch! This year was particularly pleasant since the landowner invited us inside for coffee, soda bread and some climate control! Also in the neighborhood were Sandhill Cranes, Swanson's Hawks, and Golden Eagle, among others.

A drive south of town produced a newly arrived flock of Tree Swallows and we were able to pick out the more triangular wings and rounder bodies of the handful of Violet-green Swallows mixed in. Although we were unable to locate the long-staying Trumpeter Swan at Stagecoach Reservoir, we were finally treated to satisfying views of a few pairs of Barrow's Goldeneye. These attractive birds were lifers for almost everyone and cause for quite a bit of excitement and exultation!

Along Colorado Route 14, aka "Raptor Alley", we found more Golden Eagles, Swanson's and a single Rough-legged Hawk, and after settling into our hotel rooms in Walden we visited nearby Walden Reservoir. Here we expanded our list of waterbirds, adding such hits as Canvasback and Redhead as well as Franklin's and California Gulls, American White Pelicans, American Avocets, each species vying for our attention with striking patterns and colors. We ended the day with 20 species of ducks, loons, grebes and mergansers. To celebrate our continuing good luck a steak dinner at the Elk Antler Inn was in order; this is cattle country, after all! After dinner we drove up into the foothills where we listened to the rapid, snipe-like hoots of several Boreal Owls and saw 4 moose near the roadside in the low light of day's end.

Day Seven, April 11, 2017

We loaded into the van early again this morning, this time headed to a Greater Sage-Grouse lek. We arrived at first light and parked the van with the door facing towards a large group of males displaying for two or three females. Watching these birds performing their ancient displays I couldn't help but feel a certain sadness at the plight of this great sage steppe and its native species, like these sage-grouse. What does the future hold for these birds and this starkly beautiful landscape? A passing Red-tailed Hawk flushed many of the birds to the shelter of the sagebrush and shook me from my musings. These ages-old displays never fail to mesmerize me, and it was time to go. We then had a leisurely breakfast at the Moose Creek Inn, the best, if only, breakfast in this small town, deemed by the locals the "Moose Viewing Capitol of the US".

We then wended our way eastward out of the mountains and into some habitats which we had not yet experienced on our trip. Birding the Fort Collins area with stops at Running Deer and Prospect Ponds Natural Areas made for a fun afternoon at a leisurely pace but added little to the overall trip list. We continued on to Greeley, where we spent the night and agreed that wrapping up early for the day was acceptable for everyone, as we could all use some rest at this point.

Day Eight, April 12, 2017

Today we worked our way down from the mountains and into the plains. We checked various farm ponds and reservoirs for shorebirds and further waterfowl species, with mixed results, finding Brewer's Blackbirds and both species of yellowlegs, but little else. Continuing eastwards into the plains we stopped near the town of Briggsdale where we saw Mountain Plover and the pair of Burrowing Owls I'd found while scouting. Onward from Briggsdale to the Pawnee National Grasslands where we spent some time chasing down both McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs. We watched a coyote trot along a ridge line as pronghorn grazed nearby. The Pawnee, with rolling hills covered in short vegetation and with few trees is so different from the habitats we've covered so far and it is always a joy to bird here, but we must continue to the town of Wray, near the Nebraska border.

We arrived at the offices of the Bledsoe Cattle Company, which hold claim to 70,000 acres in Colorado and an additional 30,000 in South Dakota and finish 18,000 head of cattle per year before they are sold overseas. The Bledsoe property in Colorado is also home to about 100 Greater Prairie-Chicken leks. After a brief and engaging orientation to the cattle business and the property itself, we are lead out to the lek we will visit in the morning. On the drive from the offices to the lek we flushed several Ring-necked Pheasants and even a few of the prairie chickens which had been hanging around the outskirts of the lek itself. That certainly built the excitement to view the dancing display of these chickens!

Day Nine, April 13 2017

We drove onto the Bledsoe property at about an hour before sunrise, but the Greater Prairie Chickens were already calling loudly when our group loaded into the two trucks which had been provided as blinds. For the next few hours we sat transfixed by the displaying, scuffling birds for several hours until most of the birds had gone and everyone had had their fill. The whole ride back into town was filled with recounting of the birds fascinating and often humorous behavior. This was truly a magical experience, just us and the birds at close range, and we all agreed that this was one of our favorite experiences so far, and a good way of tempering the long drive into Kansas which we will make this afternoon.

At breakfast we chatted about nearby Nebraska, which would be a new state for each of us, and so we decided on a brief detour. We drove about 15 minutes into the Cornhusker state, making a game of who could spot the most birds for their newest state list, each of us ending up with fifteen. Not bad for a half our birding the interstate! Driving south through the plains and stopping along the way, usually near water yielded a Long-eared Owl as well as Western and Clark's Grebes, Northern Cardinal and Chipping Sparrow. The Clark's Grebes even performed their very impressive mating dance! Driving some Kansas back roads we eventually found another chicken, the Northern Bobwhite, a small and smartly-patterned quail. I was especially pleased since this means that we would very likely get every possible chicken species on this years trip, bobwhite being one of the most hit-or-miss. Tomorrow is our final lek visit, and another early morning, this time our sights are set on Lesser Prairie-Chicken.

Day Ten, April 14 2017

The day began dark and early with a drive along dirt roads into the mixed agricultural land and more wild, more natural looking prairie habitat to our final chicken lek, that of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken. This species has been declining in Colorado and what small numbers there remain, are now found exclusively on private land there. Here in Kansas they share their dancing grounds with Burrowing Owls, Vesper and Lark Sparrows, but the birds are wary. Even though we exited our van very quietly and stayed hidden behind it, the birds still scattered into the bluestem and wild rye. Thinking we had scared them off we stood stark-still and dead-silent. In a few minutes the males returned to view and began dancing, offering us fine scope views of our last major target species. What a relief! We then birded nearby, following reports of Harris's Sparrow, our largest sparrow species, finding a half dozen, plus our only Northern Mockingbird of the trip.

From here it was just a matter of getting back to the Denver area, with some birding along the way. Heavy rains had flooded most of the normal shorebird habitat in southeast Colorado, causing us to miss Snowy Plover in the "normal" spots, but we did enjoy a flock of Baird's Sandpipers, a major target for a few on the trip and we finally picked up White-faced Ibis.

At Pueblo West we encountered Scaled Quail, the last possible chicken species; we had indeed seen them all! Another twenty minutes or so searching for, and finding, Curve-billed Thrasher and we were back on the road. Stops in suitable habitat looking for Greater Roadrunner and Ladder-backed Woodpecker proved ineffective, but none of us were very disappointed, our luck has been almost perfect for the last ten days. We've found all of our major target species, all of the possible chicken-like birds, and the weather has been nearly perfect for birding and scenic viewing! We arrive at our hotel near Denver International Airport right around dinner time. Over dinner we discussed the trip list, highlight, lowlights, our new inside jokes, future travel plans, etc., each agreeing that this had been an exciting, fun, expedition. We covered many miles over three states, over 150 bird species (three people got more than 30 new birds!) ate some really good food and shared many laughs; theres no way to argue that this was anything less than a wildly-successful trip! Day eleven was spent getting to the airport and then on to our next adventures!