



2001: A Chicken Odyssey - TRIP REPORT April 13-22, 2001

By Martin Selzer

Leader: Adrian Binns

A Journey across Colorado in search of “chickens”, rosy-finches and western specialties

Day 1 - The group met as planned at the Denver International Airport and we set off into the field around 11:30. Our first stops were the roads and fields behind the airport where we picked up 6 Burrowing Owls, Western Meadowlarks, Horned Larks, Black-billed Magpies; Cinnamon, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal. We then headed to Pearson Park in Fort Lupton and found the three Great-horned Owl Chicks on the nest with one of their parents nearby, a Eurasian Collared-dove, a Lincoln Sparrow and our first Swainson's Hawk. The birds at Lower Latham Reservoir were far away and poorly lit, but the birds in the area of Loloff Reservoir were just the opposite. At Loloff, we had a spectacular breeding plumage Eared Grebe, Redheads, Canvasbacks, Lesser and Greater Scaup; Snow, Ross's and Canada Geese and American Avocets. In the cattails, we had Yellow-headed Blackbirds and one Great-tailed Grackle. Our last stop before Wray was the USDA center in Akron where we picked up Blue Jay and Long-eared Owl. We ended the day at the Wray Museum for our orientation talk on the Greater-Prairie Chicken Lek.

Day 2 - We departed for the chicken lek at 4:45 and were in the blind a little after 5. After getting everyone settled, we opened the door and soon heard the males calling in the darkness. As it slowly got lighter, we could see the Prairie Chickens scurrying around on the lek and they were slowly moving in towards the blind. By the time it began getting light, at least 20 birds were on the lek. Shortly thereafter, the first females came onto the lek. As we watched and listened, at least 35 individuals (18 males/17 females) were interacting on the lek where we could observe them. Around 7AM, the females started to leave the lek and we left about 15 minutes later to have breakfast at the Kitzmiller Grazing Association.

We left Wray, headed for the Pawnee National Grasslands and arrived there around 11:30. Shortly after turning onto RD 100, Erica spotted a good bird and we all headed off into the grasses to find our first McCown's Longspurs. Except for Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks, the grasslands were quiet but we persisted and were rewarded with a flock of 9 Long-billed Curlews, 4 Mountain Plovers (including a pair we watched exchange places on a nest site). We ended our birding in the Pawnee around 5:00PM at the USDA Research facility above Nunn on Route 85 where we found 300+ McCown's Longspurs and a handful of Chestnut-collared Longspurs. We headed back to Latham Reservoir where we had two Franklin's Gulls including one with a very rosy-colored breast and some American Coots.

Day 3 - We started our day with 90 minutes of birding at Cherry Creek Reservoir/State Park. Highlights at the park were Pied-billed, Clark's and Western Grebes, Ruddy Duck, Black-Crowned Night-Herons, Osprey and a Bonaparte's Gull. We returned to the motel for breakfast before checking out at 8:45. We then headed to the southeastern corner of the state on Route

70 to 71. Although this was a relatively quiet stretch, we were treated to a young Golden Eagle hunting Black-tailed Jackrabbits. The eagle missed only because the rabbits separated and made a beeline to a fencerow.

We eventually arrived in Rocky Ford at 11:50 and found the Sewage Treatment Plant where we were treated to more Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls, American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Least Sandpipers and a good assortment of ducks. We stopped at Holbrook Lake (lots of Yellow-headed Blackbirds), Cheraw Lake (Horned, Western, Clark's and Eared Grebes) before moving on the Ft. Lyons area.

A stop at Van's Grove yielded **White-eyed Vireo**, Eastern Phoebe and White-crowned Sparrows. For the butterfly enthusiasts the grove held, Mourning Cloak, Painted Lady, Olympia Marble, and Red Admiral. We then headed to the Hasty Cemetery and the Hasty Lake Campground. At the campground, we had several Yellow-rumped Warblers, Chipping Sparrows and a **Yellow-throated Warbler** (in the line of trees to the north of the bathroom). We ended the day at Neeskah Reservoir where we found two Snowy Plovers.

Day 4 - Today was our day at the Lesser Prairie Chicken lek in Campo. This meant another very early start as we were staying in Springfield that is about 50 minutes from the lek. We left the motel at 4AM and we were in place at the lek by 5AM. Adrian, Erica, and Karl went into the blind and the rest of us stayed in the van. Around 5:15, we heard the first calls of the chickens as they moved onto the lek. With the first light, we saw 5 males displaying on the lek. Although the number of birds was far fewer than on the Greater Prairie Chicken lek in Wray, we all thought the Lessers were more striking. Their combs seemed brighter yellow and their markings, although more subtle, were very distinctive. Other wildlife sightings included Lark Sparrows, Meadowlarks, and two Pronghorns.

After sunrise, the group in the blind crawled out and made their way back to the van. To say the blind was small and cramped would be an understatement. Even Erica commented that it was a tight fit. Frank, who had the opportunity to go in the blind and twice entered only to eventually settle in the van, stated, "not staying in the blind was the best decision he made in his life!! We headed to breakfast in Campo and on the way picked up a Northern Mockingbird and a young Ferruginous Hawk. After breakfast at the Campo Café and checking out of the motel we headed to the Comanche National Grasslands in search of sparrows and Scaled Quail (we found 3). We eventually found a few more Lark, Vesper, and Savannah Sparrows. At a drainage culvert, we found side-by-side Chipping and Clay-colored Sparrows. Swainson's Hawks were everywhere.

As we returned to the highway, we had a Prairie Falcon zooming down a rise in the grasslands. Fortunately, we had several more opportunities to observe Prairie Falcons in the grasslands and Cottonwood Canyon area. After spending the morning in the grasslands, we entered Cottonwood Canyon and marveled at the change in habitat. We were almost immediately rewarded with a Canyon Towhee, a nesting pair of Mountain Bluebirds, a pair of Vermillion Flycatchers, several Townsend's Solitaires, Chihuahuan Ravens, and a Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Farther down the canyon, we had a few Western Scrub Jays, and a Hairy Woodpecker. At the primitive campground, we found two Lewis's Woodpeckers and called up two Western Screech Owls. While the owls answered us for several minutes and were calling strongly as we left, they couldn't be coaxed into view. As we exited the canyon, we stumbled across a small group on Rough-winged Swallows working a stream, a pair of Wood Ducks and a Rock Wren at the Carrizo Campground. From here we more or less headed straight to Pueblo with a few stops for more looks at the various raptors of the grasslands.

Day 5 - Today we headed into the Rockies and left the grasslands behind. As we loaded the van at the motel, we had a few more Scaled Quail and a Curved-billed Thrasher. Our first birding stop was Brush Hollow State Wildlife Area that we birded from 7:30-8:45. Our main target here

was Juniper Titmouse. The titmouse took some effort but eventually we all got on to a pair of them. We also had another Ladder-backed Woodpecker, more Western Scrub-Jays, Townsend Solitaires and a Canyon Wren calling. We next moved onto the Arkansas River Walkway in Canon City from 9-9:45. Although we dipped out on the primary target here (two immature Harris's Sparrows), we did add two Bewick's Wrens, a Black Phoebe, (which had just been found on Saturday and was a second county record) and a White-breasted Nuthatch.

We moved on to the Royal Gorge Nature Center that had been home to two Black Rosy-finches earlier in the winter and still had one coming to the feeders. While looking for the feeders, we had a Mountain Chickadee and lots of White-throated Swifts in the gorge. Eventually, Bert wandered far enough around the nature center (which was closed) and found the feeders. We immediately found a very well fed, Black Rosy-finch. We spent about 20 minutes at the nature center and more than half of that was spent finding the feeders. We're obviously better with birds than we are with feeders!

We picked up lunch at the Safeway in Salida and drove to the scenic overlook in Buena Vista for a picnic lunch. Besides a gorgeous view, we hoped for Pinyon Jays that are reported to be very prevalent. You couldn't prove that by us although we did have the first Clark's Nutcracker of the trip. We continued on to Granite where the two Gray-crowned Rosy-finches were still coming into a feeder and Violet-green Swallows hawked insects over the Arkansas River. There were also two Chukars feeding beneath the feeders and some members of the group started updating their lifelists. Erasers were quickly brought out when a local told us he had released several birds in the past two years and that "He keeps them as pets. After ticking off our second Rosy-finch of the day, we headed on to Loveland Ski Basin.

At Loveland the flock of rosy-finches was scared away from the feeder as we arrived so we set up camp and waited. One Gray-crowned Rosy-finch remained at the feeder and we waited for the rest of the flock to return. While we waited, we watched Mountain and Black-capped Chickadees at the feeders and skiers and snowboarders getting on the lift. A male Pine Grosbeak helped ease our wait. After about 20-30 minutes, the flock returned. There were approximately 125 rosy-finches in total. The vast majority were Gray-crowned but we were able to discern 3 Hepburn's Gray-crowned Rosy-finches, 10-20 Black Rosy-finches and 5-10 Brown-capped Rosy-finches. Although the Brown-capped presented a bit of an identification challenge, a breeding plumage male perched on top of the feeders to lay any qualms to rest. Besides the initial male Pine Grosbeak, a second male and a female Pine Grosbeak all came into the feeder as we watched the rosy-finches.

We then checked into the motel in Georgetown and headed out to Golden Gate Canyon State Park and Crawford Gulch Road where a pair of Northern Pygmy-Owls was reportedly setting up territory. Recently, a pair of Blue Grouse was also reported along this stretch of road. We arrived at the spot around 5 and spread out along the road to cover the reported sighting locations. After about 30 minutes of searching, Karl and Martin heard a pygmy-owl call. As they waiting for the group to join them and bring the tape, Martin found the owl sitting in a tree not 10 feet off the road and 15 feet up. He didn't know whether he saw the bird fly in or if it just moved. Either way, scopes were set up and everyone had good long looks at this bird. We then spread out again, this time in hopes of Blue Grouse. About 20 yards up the road from the owl, which hadn't moved, a Blue Grouse was calling up the hillside. Unfortunately, the grouse didn't respond to the tape and the hillside was on private property so we called it a "Most Successful Day" and headed to dinner.

Day 6 -We checked out of the motel at 6:45 and headed for some feeders in downtown Georgetown that had a small flock of Evening Grosbeaks coming to them. Sure enough about 6-10 grosbeaks and 3 Cassin's Finches were coming into the feeders. The homeowner came out to get his morning paper and greeted us. We then headed to breakfast at 'The Happy Cooker'. After a wonderful breakfast, we headed up Guanella Pass Road at 8AM.

Our first stop was at the outflow of the lower lake for American Dipper. The stream, with its beaver dam, was perfect American Dipper habitat. With a bit of searching we eventually found two and got good long looks at one of them feeding. By 9, we had made it up to the Clear Lake Campground where we found several Red-naped Sapsuckers, Mountain Chickadees, three Steller's Jays and two 'dusky' Fox Sparrows. We then continued up the road and stopped at the Guanella Pass Campground for Three-toed Woodpeckers. We found a pair of the 'Rocky Mountain' race of Three-toed Woodpeckers and after everyone got great views of them, continued on up to the pass in search of our main target for the morning, White-tailed Ptarmigan. We had run into several groups the day before who had them so we were armed with lots of current information.

We reached the pass (elevation 11,665 feet) at 10:30 and set off in search of the ptarmigan. We spread out over the pass and search many of the willow clumps but initially had no luck. Eventually after several of us had scurried well out over the hillside and stumbled through a few patches of 'thigh-deep snow', Karl radioed that he had two in the valley. We stumbled and huffed our way to Karl and his scope and were rewarded for all this effort with three winter plumage White-tailed Ptarmigan. We worked our way back to the van and got several more looks at the birds before setting off down the road back to Georgetown. At the switchback just above the Guanella Pass Campground, we had three Gray Jays that we promptly fed peanuts in hopes of photographic opportunities.

After picking up lunch to go at the Georgetown Grocery we headed off to Granby and Walden at 1PM. We arrived at the Windy Gap Wildlife Viewing Area, just outside of Granby, at 2:15 and found a nice collection of waterfowl including, one female Bufflehead, several Ring-necked Ducks, numerous Common and Barrow's Goldeneye (males and females side-by-side) and one lone 'Western Willet. After about 30 minutes, we continued on our way to Walden and Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge.

We did a once around the Arapaho NWR autoroute and didn't find anything new. As we headed into Walden, we had a Rough-legged Hawk, a Ferruginous Hawk and a Golden Eagle hunting on the grasslands. We then checked into motel in Walden. From 5-7 we scouted the Greater Sage Grouse leks in Coalmont and checked out the various small bodies of water in the Coalmont area. Where we found open water (some of the ponds were dry while others were still ice covered) we found good numbers of waterfowl. We also had two American Avocets and 3 Common Snipe. We returned to the leks to await dusk and had a Golden Eagle, Red-tail Hawk and pair of Prairie Falcons hunting along ridgeline.

At 7PM, as if someone rang a bell, we started seeing male Greater Sage Grouse moving through the sage towards the lek. We had parked at a secondary lek where the birds are more likely to be within 10-20 yards of your vehicle. We had about 6-8 birds here but they got spooked and didn't start displaying. From where we were parked, we could see the primary lek and by 7:20 15 birds were on the primary lek so we drove down. Shortly, more and more birds came to the lek and we could see others in the sage. We eventually had about 40 males displaying on the lek and at least two females came onto the lek. We left at 8PM after witnessing a wonderful, wonderful sight.

Day 7 -We returned to the primary Sage Grouse lek a bit before 7AM. There were approximately 40 birds still displaying although instead of being in the open area of the lek, most were in the sage along the edge. This time there were also at least 4 hens. The birds seemed to be displaying more actively and since they were closer to the van and there was less wind, we could hear their booming better. We went back into Walden for breakfast and left town at 9:45. On the way out of town, we stopped at Lake John. There we had a Golden Eagle, Canada Geese, Franklin's Gull, Cinnamon Teal, Lesser Scaup (lots, they were the predominant duck), Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Canvasback, Redhead, Eared Grebe, Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, Bufflehead, American Wigeon, and American Avocet. From Lake John we headed

toward Delaney Butte State Wildlife Area and Lakes. The lakes were iced over except for the edges and at 10:35, we headed to Steamboat Springs.

We arrived at Steamboat at 11:45 and we headed out Elk Ridge Road. In one of the wet areas along the road, we found a Snowy Egret. Chris spotted a Bald Eagle soaring over the plains and we all piled out of the van to take a look. We stayed along Elk Ridge Road until 2 when we pushed off to Hayden and Craig. The only new species we found along the road was two Golden-crowned Kinglets that some of us heard calling. We were running a bit behind schedule so we pushed off to Walden and Craig. We arrived at Hayden at 2:30 and reached the Blue Grouse area. While searching for the grouse, we came upon a Long-eared Owl and a pair of Spotted Towhees. First Adrian and then Martin flushed the grouse before we came upon the grouse on the ground and everyone got to watch the bird display. This bird was of the interior race with a yellow comb, red/purple air sac and broad gray terminal tail band. We continued up the road to check out the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek and found two Mountain Bluebirds, a Sandhill Crane, several Pronghorn and a pair of Elk up on the hillside.

We checked into the motel and regrouped at 6PM to head back to the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek on Road 80 in hopes of an evening show. We arrived at the lek area at 6:30 and positioned ourselves up the road to provide us a greater vantage point since we weren't exactly sure of the lek's location. In a ravine, we had a Spotted Skunk to observe while we waited. At 7PM, Adrian saw a head moving through the sage at the site where we thought the lek should be. Just as the bird was coming into view, a Harrier flew by. The grouse was spooked and took off across the hillside. We were all able to watch the grouse in flight and a second bird joined it as it flew across the valley. Although we didn't get to see the birds dance, we all did get a reasonable look as they flew. Since we figured the birds were not going to come back to the lek thanks to the Harrier, we headed off to a second lek site on Twenty Mile Road (Route 27). We didn't have any luck here but at least we had scouted the options for our dawn adventure on Friday. On the hillsides, we had several small groups of elk.

Day 8 -We decided to start the day at the Twenty Mile Road lek site figuring we knew it was active this year and gave us the option of checking out some other sites along the road before heading to the Road 80 site. We left the motel at 5:15 and got to the first lek by 6. As it slowly got light, we began to see and hear chickens dancing on the hill. We set up scopes and soon were watching about two dozen Sharp-tailed Grouse displaying. The males seemed to form loosely organized circles of 4-8 birds. They would lower their heads, raise their tails, hold their wings out, all dance at once and then stop. They would rest and then dance some more before all stopping and starting the process all over again. At 6:30 we left this lek and a few miles down the road, we noticed several birds in the hillside right by the road. We thought we had about 6-8 Sharp-tails here until a Red-tail Hawk came overhead and about 15 birds flushed.

From here, we headed back to the lek area on Road 80 and found two females in the sage by the road. We headed back to the motel and had two more Sharp-tails perched up on some tall sage bushes. This allowed us to see the fine feather pattern on their breasts. We left Craig and headed to Cameo and Coal Canyon. We picked up lunch in Palisades; some of us at the food market and others of us at "Slice-O-Life Bakery". Besides great baked goods, the bakery made good sandwiches.

We got to Coal Canyon at noon and set out birding. Almost immediately, we had a Broad-tailed Hummingbird. We spread out across the canyon and soon came upon several Chipping Sparrows, Rock Wrens, Mountain Bluebirds, Black-throated Sparrows, Black-throated-Gray Warblers and Black-chinned Hummingbirds. We also had an Empid Flycatcher that a few members of the group got glimpses at. They narrowed it down to being either a Dusky or Cordilleran Flycatcher. We slowly walked about 1.5 miles up the canyon from the gate and then started walking back in search of Chukar. We did have two pair of wild horses but no Chukar. We spread out along the trail and stayed in the canyon until 6 but remained Chukar-less, there

were comments made about how wild the pair in Granite started to look, especially to half of the plaid twins.

We then headed to Steve and Debbie Bouricius's house for Gambel's Quail and to pick up additional information on Chukar. Steve suggested another canyon and we set-off in search of Chukar. We found Bridgeport Road and head into the canyon. Despite our best efforts, we could not find a Chukar. The road dead-ended at the Colorado River but the light was good so we started scanning the cliffs on the far side. While scanning across the Colorado, we noticed a beaver swimming up river. This was of some consolation to a few of us, especially those who think that small furry creatures are cute.

Day 9 -We departed the motel at 5:15 to head towards the Gunnison Sage Grouse lek in Parlin off of Route 43. We arrived at the lek at 5:35 and could see birds already displaying in the morning twilight. As it got lighter, we were able to see their extensive piloplumes on their heads, smaller size, and slightly different display behavior when compared to their larger cousins. We counted about 12 birds on the lek (11 males, 1 female) and they were only 50-75 yards so we were hoping for great views when all of a sudden at 6:15, they all flew off they lek. We couldn't find any predator in the area and we hadn't made any loud noise so we couldn't figure out what spooked them but they were gone. In the pre-dawn we heard Sage Sparrow, Sage Thrasher and Western Meadowlark calling.

Since the birds on the Parlin lek were gone, we headed to the Waunita City Hot Springs lek. We arrived and saw about 15-20 birds still on the lek including 3 females. The birds were several hundred yards off but we could open the doors of the van and set a scope up to view them. Karl was filming them with his digital camera when he announced, "I've filmed a pair copulating!" Erica then gave us running commentary on another copulation (Oh Baby, Oh Baby!!). We watched them for a bit longer and talked to the neighboring landowner who is upset with ill-mannered birders who get out of their vehicles and go out into the sage to scare up the birds. He claims the number of birds on this lek has dwindled from well over 100 birds to less than 50; while the number of cars visiting the lek has grown from 25-30/year three years ago to over 200 this year. He has lived on this land and observed this lek for at least 7 years. His purpose is to protect the birds, while allowing birders to enjoy them as much as he does and not spoil the land.

We headed on back to the motel for breakfast and had the best look at Brewer's Blackbird we had on the entire trip. It seemed silly that we had not really gotten good looks at this bird yet but that is the way it goes. On the way out of Gunnison, we headed to a house near the post office that had Red Crossbills coming to its feeders. We found the post office, and we found the house with its feeders unfortunately they were empty. We continued around the block when a Red-naped Sapsucker caught our attention. At the same time, Erica noticed an interesting bird bathing in a puddle by the curb. It turned out to be a female Red Crossbill. In a matter of moments, we found a male Red Crossbill.

We headed to the San Luis Valley and reached the Russell Lakes State Wildlife Viewing area around 10:30. We had lots of waterfowl, a large flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and a Marsh Wren. We then stopped for a picnic lunch at the headquarters of the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge before going on the autoroute. One of the first birds we saw was a Great Egret in the cattails at the start of the route. Again, we had lots of waterfowl including Cinnamon, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Eared Grebes, Redhead, and Northern Shovelers.

Our last stop of the day was a search for Sage Sparrow and Sage Thrasher, south of Fort Garland in Sangre de Cristo building development. Unfortunately, it was very windy yet again. While the thrasher responded to the tape and sat right up for us, the sparrow was not so cooperative. We called it a day and headed for our motel in West Pueblo.

Day 10 -Except for some rather windy days, today was our only day of bad weather. Fortunately, all we had planned was to return to the Florence/Brush Hollow area in search of Pinyon Jays and Western Bluebirds. As we left the motel, it started to rain. We reached the Florence area and began searching the residential area where the jays had been reported. Unfortunately, we couldn't find the jays so we headed back into Brush Hollow State Wildlife Area. We drove around Brush Hollow and were equally unsuccessful, although now the rain had turned to snow. The sandy roads of Brush Hollow, particularly on one hillside, gave some members of the group reason to wonder if we were going to make it to the airport on time.

From here, we went on a Western Bluebird chase and since we had climbed ever so slightly, we now were in serious snow. We did manage to find a flock of Mountain Bluebirds but no Western Bluebirds. As we returned to Florence, we did see a cat that somehow had managed to climb up a telephone pole and must have realized that coming down was not going to be as easy as going up. Erica wanted us to call for help but she was out voted.

We also amused ourselves by watching a crack in the windshield grow (our birding options were fast running out). The day we drove into Cameo and Coal Canyon, we had lots of pebbles kicked up by the wind and traffic and ended up getting about 6 good-size chips/cracks in the windshield. We arrived at the airport, returned the van, and headed for home. All told, we had driven about 3300 miles on **2001: A Chicken Odyssey**.