



**COLORADO: A Chicken Odyssey - TRIP REPORT April 12-21, 2002**  
**Trip Report and Photos by Adrian Binns**  
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**Friday April 12 – Rocky Mt Arsenal; Fort Lupton; Loloff Reservoir and Lower Latham Reservoir and environs.**

By noon we were a stone's throw away from the airport at Rocky Mountain Arsenal picking up the first of what would be many Horned Larks, Western Meadowlarks, American Kestrels, Red-tailed Hawks and Black-billed Magpies. We stopped to sort through the various races of Junco's finding Slate-colored, Gray-headed, Pink-sided and one Oregon as seven Mule Deer who were having a siesta in the shade of Cottonwood trees seemed unperturbed by our presence. A short distance up the road we came across a huge Prairie Dog town covered with what seemed like a Black-tailed Prairie Dog guarding each of the hundreds of entrance holes to their burrows. Burrowing Owls were soon located and as long as we kept our distance, they allowed us great views.

After lunch in Brighton we headed to Fort Lupton and the road leading to the sewer plant, where we found a Great-horned Owl with two babies on a nest, several 'Red-shafted' Flickers and our first butterflies, Mustard "Veined" Whites and an Orange Sulphur. From here it was onto the wet meadows surrounding Loloff Reservoir where we had 12 Great-tailed Grackles and several large groups of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, a Northern Rough-winged Swallow and a perched Swainson's Hawk. A small pond held, Gadwall, Coots, Shoveler, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Pintail and American Widgeon. Reaching the reservoir which had good numbers of Ring-billed Gulls, we were treated to a squadron of 10 American Pelican's circling in the distance and Redheads, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck and the stunning male Cinnamon Teal on the water. We could not turn a distant Least Sandpiper into a Baird's and enjoyed the breeding plumaged American Avocet feeding at the waters edge as several Desert Cottontails were playing chase, besides the vehicle.

Heading towards Lower Latham, Mike spots a bird lurking on the edge of a field. He got out to investigate and flushed several Pheasants and also a Blue Jay, which is not a common bird in Colorado. As we approach the reservoir and the countless prairie dogs we spot a Northern Harrier harassing an adult Bald Eagle. This went on for several minutes before the Bald Eagle was able to shake the harrier loose and come in to perch on a dead snag within 200' of us. The late afternoon light was perfect for scanning the large body of water, and the setting with a backdrop of the snow covered Rockies simply stunning. The lake was covered in waterfowl. Horned, Eared, Western and Clarke's Grebes; Common and Barrow Goldeneyes; among the Ring-billed Gulls we find 2 Franklin Gulls and at least 30 Bonaparte's Gulls. Red-breasted Merganser and Canvasback represented some of the rarer ducks. On our way out we stopped for wonderful views of a Snipe 'winnowing'. This is the male's flight display. He circled high above us, and when he swooped down he spread his tail feathers, which produces this quavering sound. This was without a doubt the highlight for a number of us. Continuing on we find both yellowlegs and a Pintail, 2 more perched Swainson Hawks and the very pale form of Red-tailed Hawk known as "Kriders".

**Saturday April 13 – Pond at 74 Rd & 61 Rd; Briggsdale Cemetery; Crow Valley Campground; Pawnee Grasslands; Jackson State Park; Akron and Wray**



Our first stop on the way to the Pawnee Grasslands was at a pond at 74 & 61 Rd, where amongst the usual ducks we find Lesser Scaups and a first year California Gull. At the Briggsdale cemetery we could not locate a Short-eared Owl, but did find pellets. Across the road, the heavily vegetated Crow Valley Campground was sheltered from the winds and we were able to find Downy Woodpecker, flickers, Blue Jay, Great-horned Owl and a number of Mourning Cloaks. From here we drove through the Pawnee Grasslands, kicking up

numerous Horned Larks as we searched for longspurs. Soon we located a McGown's feeding on the road and are able to scope it from a close distance, seeing the chestnut patch on the median coverts. After our initial find we encounter many more as their white tails and bellies became very obvious in flight.

Mountain Plovers are a little tougher to find, but after several stops at short grass pastures we locate a single bird. Seven Pronghorn Antelope are also seen in the grasslands. Chestnut-collared Longspur prefer a little taller grass and they are far less numerous than their cousins, but we were lucky on our first try. Walking several hundreds yards into a field we encounter 3 males on territory, one perched on a stalk several feet above the ground, giving the whole group more than enough time to pick out its chestnut collar and yellow throat, and see the all black belly. A stunning bird! Leaving the grasslands we find several Loggerhead Shrikes and a Rough-legged Hawk flying away from us.



We stop by Jackson Lake and west of Akron to look for Long-eared Owls and come away empty handed. On the way to Wray we spot a Red-bellied Woodpecker, a species whose western range just reaches into eastern Colorado.

We make our scheduled appointment at the Wray Museum for the introduction to the Greater Prairie Chickens in good time. This enables us to look through the museum and replica general store, being amazed at the medicines used in days of yore and such products on the shelf as a hilarious exhilar called Jack Rabbit Milk. From here we are bused to a pond near the Nebraska border, where we find a Vesper Sparrow perched on bared wire; Spotted Towhee, Song Sparrow, numerous juncos and a Belted Kingfisher eyeing the fish in the pond. After the quick stop we went to an auction house where the Wray Chamber of Commerce put on a delicious steak dinner for us, before giving us our introduction and instructions for viewing the Greater Prairie-Chickens in the morning.

**Sunday April 14<sup>th</sup> – Kitzmiller lek and Farm; Bonny Lake; NeeNoshe Reservoir; Lamar Community College; 2 Buttes**

At 4:30AM while hoping to see a Barn Owl hunting around the motel, the howling of Coyotes and a Northern Mockingbird shattered the quiet of the early morning hours. After a 20-minute journey by bus we arrived at the Kitzmiller Ranch just after 5AM. The temperatures are a very comfortable 48 degrees as we enter the mobile trailer, which has been converted, into a comfortable viewing hide with bench seats and heater. Once the twenty or so of us who are attending this program are settled in, the awning is

raised and the sound of Horned Larks fill the air as we look out into the dark, barely able to make out the topography of the distance rolling hills. We are on the sandhills of northeast Colorado at a Greater Prairie-Chicken lek, approximately 150 yards by 200 yards.

A soft calling sound is heard off to the left of center. Slowly the cooing becomes louder as others join in. A Pheasant clucks, and soon the cackles, laughs and cooing of the Prairie Chickens drown out most of the surrounding bird song. As it becomes lighter we can see the dark blobs frantically chasing each other around. Two males are 25 yards in front of us displaying. With their pinnae raised and heads bowed they fan their tail and stamp their feet as



they deflate their bare orange throat sacs known as tympani, which in turn produces a deep booming sound that sounds like air blown across the top of a bottle. Suddenly there is a commotion that temporarily puts a halt to the display as a Jack Rabbit runs towards our birds, and then peels away and off the arena. A female flies in joining 3 others and 24 males. Such is the strong desire to impress the females that a fight breaks among two suitors as they jump into the air then lay down to face each other, clucking all the time, before settling down. The female is not impressed and continues to walk about the lek, eventually picking a male from the center where the dominant males perform, and briefly mating. We witness 3 matings this morning. The lek is full of interesting interactions. A youngster approaches the center of the lek and is immediately chased out by 2 senior members who chase him further and further away until they get a hold of his tail and teach him a lesson. Commonplace is territorial face-offs. This is when one tries to get another that has approached his area to back off. They will cluck at each and if neither budge they will sit down and wait till either they declare a draw or one backs off.

It is now 6:15AM, we have been here an hour witnessing this truly amazing spectacle and the sun is about to cast the first rays over the short grass prairie, as some 40 birds are on the lek. 5 Burrowing Owls are spotted atop their mounts well away from the lek. By 7AM the females have left and the booming stops, with the exception of booming from the edge of the lek which undoubtedly are the younger birds that probably do not realize that the females have left. 10 minutes later it is all over for another day.

After a wonderful breakfast courtesy of the Kitzmiller Ranch, we bird around the farm buildings, finding an American Tree Sparrow, Spotted Towhee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet amongst the dozens of White-crowned Sparrows. Leaving the ranch we encounter 7 Greater Prairie-Chickens most of whom were in flight.

Our first stop as we head towards the southeastern corner of the state was Bonny Lake. No sooner had we entered the park, than a Peregrine with prey flew towards us and perched beside the road. On the lake there were Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall and American Widgeon. Continuing our search of evergreen trees in the hopes of finding Long-eared Owls, we noticed a nest with a bird laying low. It turned out to be a Long-eared Owl with her mate close by, at times giving a series of low continuous hoots. Another stop along the water produced both morphs of Snow Geese and 4 Ross' Geese, 2 Baird's Sandpipers, Common Loon and Osprey. A Wild Turkey and a Fox Squirrel were flushed from the woods and we saw our only Hairy Woodpecker of the trip.



At NeeNoshe Reservoir we had a Mountain Plover besides the entrance road, a male Harrier quartering the marsh and an American Pipit at the edge of the water. On the far side of the lake were American Avocets, Common Mergansers, American Pelicans, Black-neck Stilts, a dozen Snow Geese all too far for good views, but we did get good looks at a Clarke's Grebe. From here we headed into Lamar, where the promise that the Community College was one of the better birding spots in Colorado could have fooled us on this day. The best birds we were to find, though none were cooperative, were a pair of Swamp Sparrows and a White-throated Sparrow. Robin, Mockingbird, Kingfisher and Downy Woodpecker made up the remainder of the species! So much a migrant trap, but maybe it had to do with the fact that it was 95 degrees that afternoon!

### **Monday April 15<sup>th</sup> – Lesser Prairie Chicken lek; Campo area; Comanche Grasslands; Cottonwood and Carrizo Canyon; Higbee Cemetery; Rocky Ford Sewer Plant; West Pueblo motel**

Positioned perfectly to view the lek at 4:45AM, under a crystal clear sky with an outstanding view of the milky way, we anticipate the display of our second 'chicken', the Lesser Prairie-Chicken. Within 20 minutes the first cackling sounds are heard and through the dim light we have a total of 5 males courting 2 females, though both females must have lost interest somewhere along the line as they flew away before sunrise at 6:15AM. The setting is a little different from that at the Greater's lek, in that taller grass, small shrubs and yuccas replace some of the short grass, and the main lek is very much smaller. The dominant male had the flat area that is the center of the lek to himself, while 3 others stayed in the taller grass and amongst the yuccas behind him and one was pretty much out of sight, further behind. It is not a particular large strip of short grass, only about 20 feet in length, but from our vantage point we get to see the display very well.

Several differences are noted. The males tend to jump far more than the Greater's and on occasion flying a short distance of some 5 feet; they also fan their tails only at the beginning of the display sequence; their tympani were also a shade darker and the number of "face offs" seem to be fewer and far less threatening, but that may have had to do with the fact that there were fewer birds. Once the females had left, the activity greatly diminished, and by 6:30AM there were long periods of quiet and no jumping.

On the way out of the lek we picked up 2 Cassin's Sparrow, a Lark Sparrow on a fence post and hundreds of Vesper Sparrow's that must have just arrived. Searching the surrounding fields and abandoned buildings we find a nest belonging to a pair of Chihuahuan Raven's, 2 Short-eared Owls, a Barn Owl and along the dirt roads 2 Scaled Quails. It's only 8:45AM and we are already gearing up for another unseasonably warm day that turns out to reach 95 degrees for the second straight day.

The drive through the Comanche Grasslands produces a lone Swainson's Hawk and a Mountain Plover. Arriving at Cottonwood Canyon, our first stop had nesting Eastern Phoebe's, several Pine Siskin and we catch 2 Broad-wing Hawks riding the thermals. Driving along the mostly dried up riverbed we pass a Swainson's Hawk on a nest and stop when we hear signing Rock Wrens. It isn't long before a very cooperative Ladder-backed Woodpecker comes in to tap on a telegraph pole. The only 2 Eastern Bluebirds that we would see on the trip were in a Cottonwood tree as were House Finches, American Goldfinch, Pine Siskin, Yellow-rumped Warblers and a Bewick's Wren while a pair of Chihuahuan Ravens and a Common Raven made appearances over the top of the canyon. Our next stop was just as eventful as we hear but cannot lure out a Canyon Towhee; see a Stellar's Jay, 3 Western Scrub-Jays and a pair of Red-tailed hawks. We also come across several butterfly species; Goatweed Leafwing and Sleepy Duskywing.

We had lunch at the primitive campground with colorful (though some may say gaudy) Lewis' Woodpeckers flying back and forth above our heads, and Wild Turkey and Greater Roadrunner calling.

At the entrance to Carrizo Canyon we spot a Prairie Falcon flying away. Surprising as it is, and it certainly was not for lack of trying it turns out that that is the only one we were to see this trip. Walking in the canyon along the stream we come across a Yellow-rumped Warbler and an Eastern Phoebe and Sandra finds an early migrant, a Nashville Warbler, which we are able to relocate once we met up with her.

Heading northwest, we make a stop at Higbee Cemetery for a reported male Vermillion Flycatcher. Despite a fierce wind we only find a Western Tiger Swallowtail and dozens of newly hatched Mourning Cloaks. Arriving at Rocky Ford Sewage Ponds, we find a distinct lack of water in the closest pond, but enough to keep American Avocets, several Green-winged Teal and 2 California Gulls occupied. Franklin's Gulls were seen over the furthest pond and a group of 17 White-faced Ibis were foraging in a nearby field.

Driving west of La Junta a Red Fox crossed the road, only to disappear down a hole, before everyone was able to get to see it. Arriving in Pueblo West at the motel we pick up Scaled Quail and Curved-billed Thrasher.

## **Tuesday April 16<sup>th</sup> – Pueblo West motel; Brush Hollow SWA; Canon City riverwalk; Royal Gorge; Buena Vista overlook; Granite; Loveland Ski basin; Guanella Pass**

The Curve-billed Thrasher woke me up at 4:30AM as it was singing outside my bedroom window. After breakfast we find a pair of Pied-billed Grebes on the pond with a female on a nest, a Belted Kingfisher, 2 Townsend Solitaires, a Blue Jay (which must be expanding their range westward) and 30 plus Yellow-headed Blackbirds, whose bright heads looked like Christmas lights on a tree.

What began as a calm and balmy day soon turned into a very windy (with winds up to 60mph) and cool 40 degree day. Such is the weather extremes in Colorado at this time of year. Expect the unexpected. At Brush Hollow SWA it isn't long before we come across a pair of Juniper Titmouse. These recently split titmouse are not going to set the avian world on fire with their beauty nor their cooperation. Never sitting still, we chase them from juniper bush to juniper bush for what seems like ages until the whole group is able to great satisfactory looks. The strong winds blow small groups of Pinyon Jays above the juniper and pinyon habitat, some of which were calling. Along with several scrub-jays a single Pinyon Jay perched at the top of its namesake for all to clearly see.

Protected from the winds we had a most agreeable walk along the riverwalk at Canon City. Several Lesser Goldfinch greeted us at the beginning of the trail, and we came across a small group of migrants that include 2 Wilson's Warblers, both races of "butter butts" and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. But the show belonged to the hirundines that were feeding over the Arkansas River. Among the thousands of Tree Swallows, we focused on the 4 Cliffs, 3 Rough-winged, 1 Bank, 8 Barn and 30 odd Violet-greens, which all circled around us giving us great views of these six species.

At Royal Gorge, the nature center feeders were empty but the spectacular vertical drop had dozens of White-throated Swifts flying about and a lone Peregrine Falcon. On the way towards Buena Vista we pick up Clarke's Nutcracker flying along the roadside and a perched Pinyon Jay. Following the Arkansas River northwards breeding pairs of Canada Geese and Common Mergansers are seen at regular intervals. A brief stop in Granite, for an outside shot at the rosy-finches, produces Mountain Bluebird, Cassin's Finch, White-crowned Sparrows, juncos and Stellar's Jay, but being the middle of the day the rosy-finches have long since returned to higher elevation. Though released by a homeowner, we do get looks at a Chukar before it climbs the canyon walls and vanishes behind rocks.

We cross the continental divide at Loveland Pass (11,992'), and drop down to Loveland Basin ski area where the feeders at the base of the first ski run, are not only very convenient and accessible to non-skiers but also a reliable spot for the much sought after rosy-finches.



Some 50 Brown-capped Rosy-finches are all over the feeding station, as well as a pair of Pine Grosbeaks and numerous Gray-headed Junco's. They are joined by 2 Gray-crowned Rosy-finches, 3 male and a female Black Rosy-finch giving us wonderful look at all 3 species at the feeder. Shortly thereafter they flew away and while we waited around in the hopes that they would return or for the 'hepburns' race of Gray-crowned to appear, we do not have any luck and have to settle for looks at Mountain Chickadee's and what seemed like an out of place American Robin.

At 11,552' Guanella Pass is one of Colorado's highest passes as well as being the most accessible spot to look for White-tailed Ptarmigan, but with this season's warm weather, most of the reported ptarmigans have headed for larger areas of snow cover, leaving only a few sporadic sightings. The pass had only about 10-15% of the area covered in snow, though some of it was at least thigh deep, as we all found out! After an hour and a half of searching through the willows and snow patches along the mountainside, we came up empty handed.



Over dinner and a Dam good beer at the Red Ram we strategize for the mornings attempt at this elusive specie. The lack of snow should make it easier, but somehow between the exposed willow thickets and warmer weather I fear that my hunch that the birds may have left for higher ground may be realized.

### **Wednesday April 17 – Georgetown; Guanella Pass; Windy Gap Reservoir; Kremmling; Coalmont lek**

On a crisp morning, a pre-breakfast search of the feeders in Georgetown turn up 3 Cassin's Finch, Mountain Chickadee's and a female Red-naped Sapsucker. Checking the steep cliff across the valley we spot 4 Bighorn Sheep.

Taking our time and working our way up the gorgeous Guanella Pass, we stop along the stream to watch a pair of American Dippers searching for insects in the water; come across Red-naped Sapsuckers in the Aspen grove as Golden Eagles glide across the valley and out of sight over the ridge; watch a Coyote watching us before calmly fading into the spruce trees and see singing Fox Sparrow (the Slate-colored race) and Golden-crowned Kinglet on territory before making it to the top. We spend the remainder of the morning spread out and scrutinizing every inch of the mountainside in the hopes that we would come across ptarmigan, but despite our best efforts we only find several American Pipits, which are no consolation for the main prize.

By the time we reach Windy Gap Reservoir the winds have picked up, but we are able to make out the differences between the Barrows and Common Goldeneye's without too much difficulty and spot distant Ring-necked Ducks among Gadwall, Lesser Scaup and Common Mergansers. Half a dozen American White pelican were sleeping on the shallow sand spits.

The scenery became even more spectacular as we entered North Park, the name given to the green valley dotted surrounded by snow-capped peaks and with sagebrush and the orange and purple colors of the willow thickets lining the river bottoms. Though perfect habitat for Moose, we settle for looks at the numerous Pronghorn that graze the grasslands.

In a howling and steady 50 mph we huddle in the van awaiting the arrival of Greater Sage Grouse to the lek at dusk. A Red-tailed Hawk with a full crop flew by and in the distance a white dot is spotted moving in the sage and then a second one, but the conditions make the walk for the chickens slower and more painstaking than a funeral march. In the hour and three-quarters that we were there, one made it to the lek (and a round of applause), but displaying in these conditions was out of the question.

**Thursday April 18 – Coalmont lek; Arapaho NWR; Elk River Road/FR 400; Steamboat Lake; Hayden lek**



It is 5:20AM and we are parked a hundred yards away from the Greater Sage Grouse lek as coyotes howl in the background and a Horned Lark is singing atop nearby sagebrush. In the still dark of the early hour we are able to make about 8 birds on the football sized short grass lek. As darkness fades, we find the lek covered in a thin carpet of snow that muffles the sound of the twenty plus grouse, but the sight of these huge 'chickens' and their presence is nothing short of magical. With their white chests puffed out and spiked tail spread, they strut about inflating the two lime green air sacs on their breasts. Though one expects to hear a huge sound coming from this action, it is actually only a deep soft 'pop-pop' that results.

We had a high count of 36 males and 3 females. By 6:10 AM the activity had died down and some had moved off the lek and into the sagebrush. At 6:30AM we counted 17 birds in the sagebrush and a core group of 18, which included 3 females in the center of the lek. The three young Pronghorn that had been grazing on the far side walked towards the center of lek and start chasing the grouse, causing the birds to move towards the edge of the sagebrush before returning once the antelope had finished with their silly games. 10 minutes later there are 7 left and even with the light wind they are barely audible. The rest of the group has moved to the perimeter and just inside the sagebrush, where some feed and others continue to display.

We left the lek at 7:30AM, with the vast majority of the species still in sight and having just witnessed one of the truly memorable avian spectacles. On the way to breakfast we pass a Golden Eagle on a telegraph pole.

After breakfast we take the wildlife drive loop through Arapaho NWR, trying to avoid the countless Wyoming "Richardson's" Ground Squirrels. Several White-tailed Prairie Dogs, Mountain Cottontail, White-tailed Jack Rabbits as well as a distant Coyote are seen. 2 Sage Thrashers fly across the path and one sits up on the sage long enough for us to get good views. On the lakes amongst the Ruddy Duck, Redhead, Lesser Scaup is a female Hooded Merganser. Another Golden Eagle is spotted on a post.

From here we head west stopping to view a dark morph Swainson's Hawk perched on the roadside fence and drive through snow showers and several inches of snow over Rabbit Ears before getting into the pleasant Steamboat Springs valley. From here we drove along the Elk River, which was very scenic with its snow covered Spruce trees and rocks along the watercourse. Several Yellow-bellied Marmots were sunning themselves on the edge of the road and at the Guest Ranch feeders we picked up Red-breasted Nuthatch, Evening Grosbeak, Pine Siskin among the large numbers of junco's and

Cassin's Finch. Under a bridge we find a pair of American Dipper building a nest and watch as they pick up mud and moss and fly to the nest site. Behind the ranch, the hill provides the thermals for some raptors, among them a Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-tails, a Rough-legged and a Goshawk. Further north towards the Wyoming border, we stop at Steamboat Lake and find a pair of Sandhill Cranes feeding in a wet meadow.

A late afternoon search for Blue Grouse, produces a female that Mike almost stepped on as he got out the van! Spotted Towhees were singing throughout this small tree habitat, as was a Sage Sparrow, which allowed for good looks at this less distinctive race. A Copper's hawk darted into the vegetation, though I never found out what he was after, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet was seen as we searched for a male Blue Grouse, but only came across an additional two females. Among the mammals spotted were Least Chipmunks, Golden-mantled Ground-Squirrel and a Porcupine feeding in the valley. Further up the road, we find 3 male and 2 female Greater Sage Grouse, several Sandhill Cranes, a lone Red Fox, over a hundred Elk and had some thirty plus Pronghorn running besides the van.



Returning to Hayden, Tree Swallows are everywhere along the Yampa River; several Great Blue Heron are flying along the river; a Bald Eagle is spotted in a nest and a Swainson's Hawk is found roosting in a tree.

### **Friday April 19 – Hayden 80 and 20 mile lek; Coal Canyon; Steve's house/Palisades; Escalante Canyon**

Reaching the Hayden 80 lek at 5:35AM, I find 10 minutes of silence more than enough time to convince me that the Sharp-tailed Grouse are not here, so we moved on to the more distant but obviously more reliable lek on 20 Mile Road. Arriving at 6:30 we find a group from Massachusetts with grins from ear to ear giving us the thumbs up! Atop a grassy knoll about a hundred yards away we look down upon a group of about 8 male Sharp-tailed Grouse displaying around several females. This is the most fascinating of the "chicken" dances as they display with wings out-stretched and bowed, pointed tail in the air, stamping their feet and running around clockwise in circles, then sometimes accelerating in a straight line in a particular direction, like a wind up toy and then abruptly coming to a halt, all of them, before continuing. By 7:15AM the group took off and we counted at total of 33 birds. Though the spectacle of the Greater Sage Grouse displaying is very impressive, we all agree that this display, that must have inspired the Native Americans, is the best.



Pulling into Coal Canyon in Cameo at 12:30PM in time for lunch, we hear a Chukar calling. Lunch is called off (temporarily) as we search for this canyon species that is well adapted to this rocky habitat and blends in so well. It takes a half hour from atop a great vantage point of trying to pin point the calling birds, before one is spotted flying away from the far canyon wall and towards us. Landing at the base of our knoll, we descend and form a circle around the pair, giving us all great views, before they take off and are not to be re-located.

On the western side of the state these canyons are traditionally warmer earlier in the season and the Cottonwood trees along the rivers have already begun to leaf out, allowing for the earliest of migrants to move through this part of the state. A little searching amongst the juniper and pinions in the canyons produces a Black-throated Sparrow, several Green-tailed Towhees, Savannah Sparrow, numerous White-crowned Sparrows, Rock Wren, Bewick's Wren, Say's Phoebe, Bushtit, American Kestrel, Common Raven, Golden Eagle and two Western Wood Pewees as well as an early Gray Flycatcher that was seen well by everyone. 6 Wild Horses were also grazing half way up the canyon side.

From here we visit my friend Steve's small apple orchard and hear the amazing results of his Black-chinned Hummingbird nesting surveys, of which he has over 30 nesting on his property! It is early in the season but we have arrived just in time to see two Black-chinned that have been around for 48 hours at his nectar feeder. More will follow over the next week or so and soon he'll have an astounding thousand plus moving through daily! As we tour the orchard spotting Gambel's Quail running under the brush, we find a motionless Lewis' Woodpecker and curious Western Screech Owl listened to an angry Kestrel screaming at a Red-tailed Hawk less than 50 yards from us.

### **Saturday April 20<sup>th</sup> – Parlin lek; Parlin wet meadows; San Juan NF/ Wolf Creek Pass; Russell Lakes SWA; Temple Canyon SP**

Pulling into the Parlin lek at 5:25AM on a calm and mild 32-degree morning, we flush a Poorwill from the dirt road. Two other vans have already positioned themselves and we tuck in behind them. We are in the sagebrush habitat of west-central Colorado in Gunnison County, to view the recently split and isolated population of smaller Sage Grouse species now known as Gunnison's Sage Grouse. A Sage Thrasher, between us and the lek, has just begun to call and does not let up for over an hour. It was not long before we could hear the multiple "pops" of the Gunnison Sage Grouse. Though we can barely see them in the dark, we know that there are several here at this small lek. Two-thirds the size of their cousins, they differ by having a more distinctively barred tail; a thicker set of filoplumes, which they toss over their heads while displaying and of course has a different (longer) call. This morning there are 7 birds, 5 males vying for the attention of 2 females, but by 5:55AM it appears as though the females have walked off the lek, probably unimpressed by the males. It is now light enough to clearly see the heavier and darker head that the Gunnison's has over the Greater's, and the more jerky head movement that allows the filoplumes to be flicked forward over the crown. But as the females have left, these displays become less frequent, and standing about or laying down seems to be the only activity, until at 6:30AM the show is over as one flies off followed by the others.

We returned to the area after breakfast to look for the Little Blue Heron (a rare bird for western Colorado) that Barry Zimmer had found, but it must have moved on. From here we headed west along the river and south to the San Juan National Forest. Working our way up Wolf Creek Pass we stop at the first campground and are soon rewarded with 2 Clarke's Nutcrackers, a Fox Sparrow, Townsend Solitaire, Northern Flickers, Mountain Chickadee's and a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers. These woodpeckers, which are the most sexually dimorphic of this genus, were working the sap holes on the spruce trees close to the ground and cooperated for all to see as they flew around the campground. We went onto the summit, but the winds were so ferocious that we returned to another campground to try for Three-toed Woodpecker, and though one did respond to the tape, it would not cooperate and remained deep in the spruce on the far side of the river.

By the time we had reached the San Luis valley, we were feeling the brunt of the wind especially at Russell Lakes SWA, which was totaling exposed to the elements. Despite the strong winds there was a Great Horned Owl on a nest with two young and her mate flying was around the car park before trying to maintain his balance on a tree branch. A large group of Franklin Gulls were in the adjacent fields, and 6 Cattle Egrets and a Snowy Egret were feeding in the shallow pools of water besides the road. On the lake there were 5 Clarke's Grebes, 2 Cinnamon Teal and 7 American Coots among the regular waterfowl. Half a dozen Northern Harriers were quartering the marshes, several

Yellow-headed Blackbirds were seen, and good numbers of White-faced Ibis were flying about as 2 Marsh Wren briefly perched atop reeds before dropping down out of view.

Our final stop was at Temple Canyon State Park, where we stopped and birded at various points along the drive. Clarke's Nutcrackers, Canyon Towhees and Bushtits were seen along with Mule Deer, but little else. With an early evening mist beginning to settle in, the dirt road along the higher elevations became slippery, so we counted our blessings and made it out safely, and just in time to the local diner.

With all but one species of "chicken" recorded on the trip, I called the motel in Georgetown for information about the conditions at Guanella Pass, and alas the report was for unfavorable conditions and heavy snow on the pass. That unfortunately put an end to any hopes of returning tomorrow to try again for White-tailed Ptarmigan - a major disappointment for the entire group.

### **Sunday April 21<sup>st</sup> – Pueblo West Motel; East of Colorado Springs/ Squirrel Road to Judge Orr Road; Garden of the Gods; Castle Rock State Park**

Our final day! Scaled Quail, Curve-billed Thrasher, Savannah Sparrows and Eastern Cottontail were around the motel. We decided to head east into the grasslands to look for several species still missing from our list, notably Ferruginous Hawk, the briefly seen Prairie Falcon and Western Bluebird to name but a few. Driving east of Colorado Springs between Squirrel and Judge Orr Road we come across a Coyote strutting through the fields; Red-tails, Swainson's and a Rough-legged Hawk that would glide in the wind from one telegraph post to the next as we would try an approach, but no Ferruginous. Mid morning finds us at the Garden of the Gods, a beautiful park with wonderful rock formations, reputed to be one of Colorado's better places to find Prairie Falcon. Two Canyon Wrens are heard, we feed Western Scrub-Jays peanuts but no Prairie Falcon!

We finished up the tour working our way through Castle Rock State Park, beginning at the southern end, which had over a hundred bluebird boxes lined up along the entrance road. Would we be in luck? As fate would have it we eventually come across bluebirds, but they are Mountains! And then more bluebirds. But again only mountains. Finally, a pair of Westerns, actually 5 of them! Given the number of boxes in the area this has to be a sight to see once breeding gets under way.

With the distances covered we really got to know this spectacular state, from the eastern prairies to the Rocky Mountains. This was another wonderful trip, driving over 2700 miles in search of "chickens"! Though we missed the ptarmigan, we witnessed all of the leking species, including the majestic Greater Sage Grouse and amazing Sharp-tailed Grouse, and also returned with stunning memories of Rosy-finches, Common Snipe "winnowing", Long-eared Owls and Williamson Sapsuckers among the 184 species of birds and numerous mammals seen.