



COLORADO: A Chicken Odyssey - TRIP REPORT April 10-20, 2003

Summary by Adrian Binns

Trip Report by Edie Parnum

Leaders: Adrian Binns and Mike Fritz

A number of highlights marked another successful trip to Colorado from all the waterfowl that were seen while scanning the numerous reservoirs to the amazing displays of the chickens. Scanning some of the reservoirs that dot the state, we came across Northern Shovelers sometimes in their thousands, Redheads, Canvasback, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Clarke's and Western Grebes and stunningly plumaged Eared Grebes as well as a dozen or so Barrow's Goldeneye side by side with their more common cousins, allowing for great comparisons. Amongst the more common shorebird species Baird's Sandpipers were on the move and a pair of Snowy Plovers were settling into their nesting territory along the shore of a lake. The grasslands in the eastern plains held numerous Vesper, Cassin's and a Lark Sparrow while the Pawnee's had both McGown's and Chestnut-collared Longspur displaying. A pair of Mountain Plovers was also located and Mike spotted a Prairie Falcon pick off a Horned Lark, which we duly watched as it ate its prey on the ground. Raptors were well represented, with 13 species being seen. Kestrels are very common, Swainson's regularly seen and occasionally a Rough-legged was spotted. One can not forget the Ferruginous Hawks cooperating very nicely as they flew between fence posts and a nest, in the top of a lone tree in the prairie or the Golden Eagle that circled around us along the Arkansas River, as we pulled in to have lunch. With every year different, this was no exception as both Golden Eagles and Great Horned Owls were seen in good numbers. In Cottonwood canyon two Western Screech-Owls called during the hot midday hours and we had some great encounters with Long-eared Owls, one being on a nest and the other at very close range.

In the pinyon-juniper habitat around Pueblo we found several Pinyon Jays and one of the plainest avian species there is, the Juniper Titmouse. Once we reached the snow covered Rockies, Cassin's Finch, Mountain Chickadee, Pine Grosbeak and pink-sided Junco became the supporting cast for the rosy-finches. The feeders at Loveland had numerous Brown-capped, small numbers of Gray-headed including 4 Hepburn's (the coastal race) and 4 Black, the least common of the three in Colorado. Guanella Pass was unfortunately closed due to snow slides, making the trek for Ptarmigan out of the question, but we did pick up an American Dipper working its way up the stream. In the snow, at times seemingly like a blizzard, we worked our way through Arapho NWR. Though there were good numbers of ducks on the ponds, it was in the sagebrush that we had the most luck. A Sage Thrasher was very cooperative as it sang from the tops of the sage and we watched an American Badger stalking a Richardson's Ground-

Squirrel some twenty yards from us, before leaving it to look for dinner in peace! Once again in the snow, we searched the Ponderosa Pines for woodpeckers, in particular Three-toed, which eluded us, but we had luck finding all the others including Red-naped Sapsucker and a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers.

We came to Colorado for the "chickens" and they did not disappoint. 43 Greater Prairie-Chickens greeted us on their lek early one morning in the sandhills, booming, clucking, laughing and stamping their feet – their efforts well rewarded, as we witnessed numerous copulations. By contrast the Lesser Prairie-Chicken numbers in Colorado are dwindling and only a few were seen on the lek, but it was enough to see that their dances are different – jumping and pausing more than their larger cousins. For sheer size, the majestic Greater Sage Grouse, put on a stunning show on a carpet of snow, with up to 55 birds. One of those magical moments occurred once most had dispersed into the sage, when a Golden Eagle flew low over the ridge and about 30 birds exploded out of the sage and straight over our van! Their smaller cousins the Gunnison's are not fairing as well. Only 5 showed up at the lek and a Coyote chased them out. Probably the most fascinating of all the displays belongs to the Sharp-tailed Grouse, and from our observation point, we saw them spin, stop, spin and run with their tails raised. A lone male Blue Grouse rounded out our large "chickens", though he was not as cooperative as we would have liked – but that is the joy of birding!

Trip Report by Edie Parnum

Thursday, April 10

We arrived at the Denver Airport in the late afternoon. While still in the airport, I realized I did not have my fanny pack purse. I had taken it out of my backpack while on the plane intending to wear it while disembarking. Because I never put it on, I left this inconspicuous black purse behind. Luckily, my wallet with my money, driver's license, and credit cards were still in my backpack, but my address book and various replaceable items were gone. I filled a missing item report with United Airlines, but wasn't hopeful about recovery. As we drove away from the airport, I could see the snow-covered Rocky Mountains in the distance. The view told me I was in beautiful Colorado, and this was the beginning of my long-anticipated chicken trip. So I put the lost purse out of my mind.

Friday, April 11

We began our first day of birding in Colorado at Cherry Creek State Park Reservoir. There were many waterfowl including Ring-necked Duck, Redhead, Common Goldeneye, Blue-winged Teal, Eared Grebe, and Clark's Grebe. A close Cinnamon Teal was beautifully illuminated by the sunlight, the best view I'd ever had of this lovely western species. A Black-crowned Night Heron was perched up in a tree. The White Pelicans had a bump on their bills called a "centerboard," my first time seeing this odd feature. Our first lesson from Adrian, one of the trip leaders: the male American Avocet has a straighter bill than the female. A perched Swainson's Hawk gave us a chance to observe some key field marks again related by Adrian. The wings are long like other

migrants that travel great distances, and the white throat is diagnostic. We found our first Western Meadowlark, a bird we would see every day on this trip.

As we made our way toward the Pawnee National Grasslands, we saw many Black-billed Magpies. We admired their dapper plumage but even then realized that we would be seeing them regularly throughout Colorado and would, implausibly as it then seemed, become bored with them. My friend Barb collected two magpie feathers that would come in handy later in the trip. At Rocky Mountain Arsenal we found a Black-tailed Prairie Dog town with Burrowing Owls. Nearby in a pond, we got a good look at a fine Baird's Sandpiper showing the scaly black spots on its back and thin, straight bill.

At Latham Lake there were many ducks including Northern Shovelers and Buffleheads that had not been seen earlier. We also saw a Western Grebe and got to compare it with the Clark's. The Western's greenish bill seems to fade away when viewed from a distance unlike the Clark's more prominent yellow bill. The Western has a dark looking back and a black "hat" that comes down over its eye like a villain in a western movie. The Clark's has a lighter body and less of a dark hat (presumably named for William Clark, who was a hero, of course).

In the Pawnee National Grasslands the land is flat and the roads are laid out in a grid with unimaginative names. At Route 14 and Grid 51 we found my first lifer, a Mountain Plover, in the short grass it prefers. We also spotted a male Northern Harrier, the gray ghost. At Roads 100 and 49 we took a walk into the grassy hills and were delighted to find both Chestnut-collared and McCowan's Longspurs. The Chestnut-collared prefers longer grass, we were told. We watched the longspurs fly over the grass and then float down at angle with their wings spread. As they flew we could distinguish the McCowan's with its upside-down black "T" on the end of its mostly white tail from the Chestnut-collared's mostly black tail. The Horned Larks, also in the area, flew straight up and then came straight down. The Horned Larks, longspurs, and Western Meadowlarks were all singing. What a magical place!

Later as we were driving through the grasslands, we stopped for a Prairie Falcon. We watched it through our scopes as it ate a Horned Lark. We also saw a flying Golden Eagle. Adrian told us an easy way to distinguish flying immature Golden Eagles from Bald Eagles. The Golden when it stops flapping will end on a slight dihedral (as if on cue, the bird did exactly that), whereas a Bald Eagle ends with its wings lowered. That's how hawk watchers tell them apart from a mile away. At another stop we looked unsuccessfully for Long-eared Owls in a stand of pines, but we did see a little flock of Ruby-crowned Kinglets, one of which was an excited male with its red crest raised. We did find some pellets, and I found a rabbit skull.

The landscape in this part of Colorado is mostly flat (no mountains here) or sometimes undulating. Well east of the Rockies, this is a very dry part of the state similar to Nebraska and Kansas. The green areas were planted in grain and presumably irrigated. We saw cattle frequently and some were in large pens, evidently ready to be transported for slaughter. The only trees in evidence were Cottonwoods. Everywhere there was lots of big farm equipment.

In the town of Wray in sandhill country, where we spent the night, there was a sign welcoming “Prairie Chicken Viewers.” After a slow dinner, we made a tardy appearance at a required briefing on the rules for watching the Greater Prairie Chickens. A man from the wildlife service of Colorado told us to be ready by 4:15 AM and dressed warmly for the school bus ride to the chicken lek. We had to be in the blind at the lek well before dawn so that we wouldn’t disturb the chickens as they assembled. Since “bathroom” breaks were not allowed, we were not allowed any coffee beforehand. After the lecture concluded, we enjoyed touring Wray’s historical museum that had stuffed chickens on display as well as antique costumes, furniture, farm equipment, and a replica of a general store replete with patent medicines, canned foods, hats, etc. They offered souvenirs of the Greater Prairie Chicken Tours, and I picked up a refrigerator magnet that says, “I got up with the chickens.” That’s exactly what we did the next morning.

Saturday, April 12

We were up at 3:45 AM, and no one missed the 4:15 deadline for the bus trip. After all, we were here to see the chickens and none of us wanted to be left behind. It was still dark when we arrived at the lek around 4:45. The blind had benches and even cushions for the 30 or so people who were present. At first there was no sound except our own whispers, but well before first light we heard a Western Meadowlark singing and then a Horned Lark. Then we heard the Greater Prairie Chicken (2nd lifer) males starting to “boom”. It was a two or sometimes three-noted sound like a bassoon or someone blowing over a bottle. Gradually as the lighting improved, we could see the displaying males’ yellow air sacks and their tail feathers held up exposing a white undertail. When the visibility finally became quite good, we could see their erect pinnate feathers on the back of their necks. The competing males would face each other in a crouched position with their wings fanned back and down and feet stomping. They would lunge at each other and jump up in the air until the dominant male succeeded in forcing its competitor off to the sidelines. Clearly, they were “playing chicken!” Mostly the females didn’t seem to pay much attention to all this fancy posturing, but we did see some copulations take place. It seemed that the females were only interested in mating with a very few males at the center of the lek. Our best view of a displaying male was one that performed all by itself not far from our blind, but well away from the main action. Perhaps it was an inexperienced first year bird, and it certainly didn’t have any luck with the females. In all we counted 23 females and 20 males at the lek. Also we observed Burrowing Owls and mating Killdeer within view of our blind. We humans had a great time watching the scene and kept up a constant, whispered patter of lewd commentary.

After the show was over, we were driven to Kitzmiller Ranch where we were served a fabulous breakfast more fit for laboring ranchers than for tourists who had just been sitting for three hours. However, the farm-fresh scrambled eggs, pancakes, and bacon were certainly relished by us all. I was told the bacon came from pigs raised on a nearby farm, and it was the most meaty and tasty I’d ever had. This breakfast was served by volunteers from the Wray Chamber of Commerce. Evidently, they realize they have a good tourist attraction for birders.

Before leaving the grounds of the ranch, we walked around looking for some more birds. Not much of interest was around, but there were lots of White-crowned Sparrows and a Blue Jay from the east. However, we had yet another opportunity to view and comment on the sex lives of birds. We watched a pair of House Sparrows mate eleven times!

Our next stop was Bonny Lake where there was a good collection of water birds. For me the best was a flock of approximately 350 Sandhill Cranes. Previously, I'd only seen them singly or in a small group, but this time they were bugling and took off as a noisy flock. What a sight! The pair of Northern Harriers with the male displaying by flying up and down was an interesting sight as well. The wind made it difficult to use my scope, but I managed to see Franklin's Gulls (large white spots on primaries and white crescent on secondaries), Herring Gulls, Long-billed Dowitchers and several Ross's Geese that were mixed in with the Snow Geese. After the rest of the group had left, I was the only one who saw the three white-faced Ibis. For once, being slower than the rest of the group paid off. We also saw Chipping Sparrow, Townsend's Solitaire, and Say's Phoebe.

At another spot nearby Mike, our second leader, found a Long-eared Owl on a nest. Later at LaMar Community College he found another Long-ear that perched in a spot where we had such great views that we could see its blinking eye. Along the way we saw three Wild Turkeys, one displaying. At Nee Skew, there was a pair of Snowy Plovers on the shore.

Sunday, April 13

Now in the southeastern corner of the state near the Campo Lek, we were up at 3:30 AM and in the vans at 4:00 to go for Lesser Prairie Chickens. As before we had on all our cold weather gear, especially since this time we were staying in the vans with the doors open so we could take turns using the scope. We had covered over the inside lights with duck tape to minimize disturbance to the chickens. Gradually we could hear the male Lesser Prairie Chickens (3rd lifer) cackling and sometimes sounding like they were laughing hysterically. When it began to get light, we could see that the grass was taller at this lek, but we were still able to see the displaying chickens (only 5-7 males and 1-2 females). Although the males were less aggressive toward each other than the greater ones we had seen the morning before, their performance consisted of spectacular jumps and short flights of about five feet. They would stand about 5-7 feet apart, inflate their purplish air sacs, and flip their fanned tails down while clucking softly. For a while one female sat up on a little mound as if she were Queen of the Lek; however, she seemed to pay little attention to the males who were obviously anxious to be noticed. Shortly after sunrise, she flew off and the males quieted down. The show was over.

Afterward and still without breakfast or even coffee, we searched the Comanche Grasslands for birds. From inside the vans we got a good look at a handsome Scaled Quail and saw its cotton top as it scurried away. We stopped at several abandoned farms and looked for Western Screech Owl (a bird I need) in the dilapidated buildings and nearby trees. However, only Great Horned Owls (extremely common in Colorado, we noticed) were found. One was nesting in an abandoned building, and we were able to stare eyeball to eyeball as it sat still on the nest. At one

point when Ann made a clacking sound, Rosemary thought she'd surely heard a Barn Owl. A few Barn Swallows and Say's Phoebes were around. Luckily, none of us required real bathroom facilities.

Although still without coffee, we kept at our quest by munching on granola bars. The Western Screech Owl remained illusive, but we spotted a pair of light-morph Ferruginous Hawks. We had excellent views of this large raptor with a bulky chest. We could see its long blue and rufous wings, white chest, rufous thigh, and dark stripe over the eye. We also had looks at Curve-billed Thrasher, Swainson's Hawk, Vesper Sparrow, Cassin's Sparrow, and Lark Sparrow. Mike claimed he saw a Northern Mockingbird. I could tell that Adrian was skeptical about finding one here, especially when he found a Loggerhead Shrike in the same bush. Nevertheless, both were there, after all, so both leaders maintained their credibility.

Despite the excellent birds, I was beginning to be more and more interested in breakfast. However, we kept at it and continued to find birds. We located a raven's nest in an old wind mill. A pair of Long-billed Curlews, always a welcome sight for us easterners, was spotted stalking through the grasses.

Finally, we drove into town for breakfast. Adrian had made arrangements for us to eat and pick up box lunches at a restaurant called the Grassland Grill. We drove back and forth on the only main street in this tiny, remote town but could only find Shirley's Grill. We tried to call on a cell phone (cut off) and ask at a gas station (closed). We were dying for coffee, so we gave up and decided to give Shirley's a try. Much to our amazement, the sign inside said "Grassland Grill". They were ready for us, served us an excellent breakfast, and provided a nice lunch in a brown bag decorated with cute bugs and yellow ribbons. Each said "Happy Hunting." Probably hunting is what the locals do in the outdoors here. A sign on the wall said, "Eat Beef"! The temperature had risen, so before leaving we changed out of our heavy layers of clothes into shorts.

As we drove along, the landscape changed somewhat, and we started to see Cholla Cactus. We visited Cottonwood Canyon and Carrizo Canyon where there were Junipers, a small oak, and, of course, more Cottonwoods. We saw Rock Wren and Bewick's Wren, both singing. Also got looks at female Vermillion Flycatcher (salmon colored like a Say's Phoebe). While we were eating lunch at a lovely, shady spot by a creek, Adrian found the central form of the Hairy Woodpecker with mostly black wings but no Ladder-backed or Lewis's. We heard the Western Screech Owl, one of my target species, but it stayed hidden and uncounted somewhere in the evergreens. Although we had been seeing what were presumably Chihuahuan Ravens here in the grasslands, I didn't feel I could safely distinguish them from the Common Raven and count it as a lifer. I hadn't seen the white on the neck or the feathering on the bill. Adrian gave me a lesson on the flying birds. I saw the Chihuahuan Raven's (4th lifer) more fanned and less wedged tail, so I counted it.

Monday, April 14

After a quick breakfast at a reasonable hour, we toured the grounds of our motel in Pueblo West. We found Scaled Quail, Curve-billed Thrasher, Coots, and Pied-billed Grebe. At Brush Hollow SWA, there were Pinyon Pines and Pinyon Juniper, so, of course, we looked for Pinyon Jay. Adrian gave another one of his lessons, this time about corvids. Crows walk, but jays hop for the most part. However, Pinyon Jays and Clark's Nutcrackers walk and have shorter tails than the other jays. Unfortunately, I didn't see either the Pinyon Jay or the Clark's Nutcracker. There were several Western Scrub Jays around showing their long tails. We were successful in finding a Juniper Titmouse, a nondescript bird that used to be lumped with the Oak Titmouse and called Plain Titmouse—no wonder. We also found Pine Siskins and Chipping Sparrows. At a Vasco Pond we saw Hooded Mergansers, Lesser Scaup, and Buffleheads.

At the Canon City River Walk, there weren't very many birds around, but we enjoyed watching a pair of male red-shafted Northern Flickers disputing over the territory. Beavers had been active along the stream, even attempting to fell one quite large tree. Lesser and American Goldfinches were nearby. Interestingly, the Lesser also makes a whiny sound.

Next we drove to a place called Tunnel Drive. We saw some tunnels in the steep, rocky cliffs. It was a perfect place for Canyon and Rock Wrens, and we had good looks at both. White-throated Swifts swooped and twittered along the top of the cliff. We managed to see a Painted Lady butterfly in our binoculars and had a scope view of a Question Mark, too.

We visited a tourist spot called Royal Gorge where the scenery was spectacular, but there were no feeders at the nature center. Afterward we followed the Arkansas (pronounced Ar-KAN-sas) River. In the valley the yellow-stemmed willow shrubs showed lovely shades of purple and red. We stopped at the aptly named Buena Vista where we had a picnic lunch on a hilltop with a view of the snow-capped Rocky Mountains. Numerous Painted Ladies streamed by, and later I learned that they were migrating north from Mexico. It was Mike's birthday, and Ann had purchased a cake at the Safeway. What a lovely place to celebrate!

At Loveland Pass Ski Basin we went directly to the bird feeder and were not disappointed. There were lots of birds, three of them lifers. They were Brown-capped Rosy-finch, Gray-crowned Rosy-finch, and Black Rosy-finch—numbers 5, 6, and 7. The Black Rosy-finch, usually the most difficult to locate, was especially attractive with its mostly black body set off with raspberry-colored wings and belly. I was also glad to see the Gray-crowned Rosy-finch, since I had missed it at Mono Lake in September. In addition, we were happy to see the Hepburn's subspecies of the Gray-crowned, since it may soon be declared a separate species. Although not a lifer, the male and female Pine Grosbeaks were gorgeous. Cassin's Finch and pink-side and gray-sided juncos were at the feeder, too. Nearby we found some Evening Grosbeaks.

While we were still at the ski resort, Kathleen discovered a plastic shark in the snow. She brought it back to the van, and it became our mascot. Adrian drove our van, and all the women

members of the group were passengers. To say that we were a fun-loving group is an understatement. One of our amusements was to feed cookies to the shark. Frankly, it didn't take much to make us laugh.

We drove on through the mountains to Georgetown, an attractive town with small Victorian houses, where the snow was three feet deep. Even before leaving Philadelphia, Adrian had told me we might not see the White-tailed Ptarmigan, one of the target chickens. They can only be found above the tree line. In previous years Adrian had found them at nearby Guanella Pass, but we were told that the road was not yet plowed after the heavy snows of a few weeks ago. We thought we'd give it a try anyway. Well, sure enough, it was closed. However, we enjoyed our time tromping around along the Guanella Pass Road anyway. It followed a stream where we had a quick glimpse of an American Dipper. Best of all, we spotted a White Tailed Ptarmigan on a rock by the road. It certainly appeared life-like, but Mike had made this realistic-looking bird out of snow with a black pebble for an eye. Good for laughs and a photo-op.

Tuesday, April 15

The next morning before breakfast we drove around Georgetown to see what could be found at feeders. Not much of note was around except for Mountain Chickadees and a singing Fox Sparrow. We spotted Bighorn Sheep on the mountainside. Afterward, we had a gourmet breakfast at The Happy Cooker (called "happy hooker" in our van).

Our next destination was Genesee Park. Patches of snow made hiking difficult, but we were able to locate a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers drumming to each other. We had to chase them for a long time before we had good views of the yellow belly, white rump, and white wing on the male. We also had excellent looks at a singing Townsend's Solitaire sounding much like a finch. The Western Bluebirds and Pygmy Nuthatches were seen well, too.

At Windy Gap Reservoir (appropriately named) we ran into some nasty, wet weather with high winds. I ate my lunch in the van and waited for the storm to pass. When I ventured out and set up my scope, I could see, in spite of the vibrations, Common Goldeneye, Barrows Goldeneye, Redhead, Blue-winged Teal, White-faced Ibis, and many other ducks. The gulls included California, Bonaparte's, and Ring-billed. We took note of the California's yellow-green legs and long, straight bill. Visibility was actually good enough to see the red and black on the bill and the dark eye. With Adrian's guidance, we also spent time studying the differences between the female goldeneyes. The steep forehead and yellow bills (not always diagnostic) of the Barrows was apparent at great distances. The Common's forehead is sloped down to its larger, mostly dark bill. We were also entertained by a Red-tailed Hawk chasing a Golden Eagle.

At Arapaho NWR we chased a Sage Thrasher around in thick, falling snow. I actually saw it well, finally. The pale, grey-brown plumage was easy to see against the snow. It has a small bill for a thrasher and streaks on its breast. Undoubtedly this refuge was a good place to see waterfowl, but the visibility was poor. The highlight was a Badger, a life mammal for all, which we saw clearly and watched for around twenty minutes. We could even see its long, ferocious

looking claws. At one point a ground squirrel passed by, but the Badger gave only a half-hearted chase.

At Walden Reservoir it was still snowing, but we managed to find a Yellow-headed Blackbird. There were lots of ducks, but we couldn't see them well. We did manage to make out an Eared Grebe in breeding plumage. Driving along we saw brilliant blue Mountain Bluebirds flying back and forth across the road. There were lots of raptors in the area. We spotted a light-morph Rough-legged Hawk, identified as a female because of the heavy bellyband. We also saw its white tail and dark terminal band. When it took off, we chased along beside the bird as it flew at least 35 mph. A sub-adult Golden Eagle followed us, too, perching on several telephone poles. We could see the small head, the white at the base of the tail, and once again the slight dihedral at the end of its flaps.

Late in the afternoon we paid a visit to the Greater Sage Grouse lek at Coalmont. Beside the parking area, someone with a sense of humor had placed a toilet complete with toilet paper but without the plumbing attachment. Beside it was a sign that said, please remain in your vehicles. Visibility was terrible, so we could only barely make out a few males displaying occasionally. These large birds display by puffing up their huge white chest sacks and fanning their long, pointed white-spotted tail feathers. On the way back to the motel Adrian hit a robin.

Wednesday, April 16

At dawn the Greater Sage Grouse (8th lifer) at the Coalmont Lek were spectacular. We could clearly see them inflate their enormous white chests and erect the long spiky tail feathers. In fact there were two sets of tail feathers, the long ones and also some shorter feathers with white spots. They also had erect filoplumes that we could see in the scope. They made bubbly, popping sounds that were barely audible. As it became lighter, the activity quieted down. Then a Golden Eagle flew over the lek and all the chickens took off, some flying directly over the van. A memorable sight!

It was snowing as we drove on to Steamboat Springs where Mike said we would be able to ride a gondola to the top of the mountain for breakfast. However, the resort had closed three days earlier despite perfect conditions for skiing. We found a breakfast stop in town. We then did our usual shopping at Safeway (an Osprey flew over the parking lot) before heading out of town.

We got good looks at a low flying Bald Eagle on Steamboat Lake at Stagecoach State Park. I took two pictures of the lovely scene. We stopped along the highway to take a picture of a Great Blue Heron Rookery. Along the Elk River we watched an American Dipper feeding underwater. It would dive into the rushing water for prey and then come up to eat it on a rock or overhanging branch. Sometimes it appeared to float down stream but always seemed in control. Nearby Mike heard the chip notes of an Evening Grosbeak. When it made its appearance, it was a beautiful male with a greenish bill. I watched a Golden Eagle in the scope for a long time but never saw the golden hackles. We got a good look at a Cassin's Finch. It has a beautiful rosy color that is strongest on its head. The tail was strongly forked and the undertail coverts are streaked. The

culmen is straight. The streaks on the underparts of the female are finer and more well defined than the House Finch.

In the afternoon at the Hayden Lek (lek is probably a misnomer in this case), we searched for Blue Grouse. I actually had two brief glimpses of the male walking behind some bushes, its tail up in display. We were told that this chicken was quite confident and would sit on a low perch undisturbed. So we spread out and scoured the brushy vegetation (primarily Scrub Oak and sagebrush with a small pretty bluebell here and there) for about two hours hoping for a photo opportunity. Adrian played a tape, but the song is barely audible. I saw one fly briefly, and together with the two previous brief looks, it was enough to count the Blue Grouse as my 9th lifer of the trip. We also saw three Sharp-tailed Grouse flying.

Thursday, April 17

The temperature was in the 20s when we left at the relatively late hour of 5:00 AM to go to the Sharp-tailed Grouse led on 20 Mile Road. Standing outside in the cold and wind to scope birds that were 100 yards away was challenging. We could make out about seventeen chickens. Their air sacks are lilac-colored, but they have no pinnae or filoplumes. The males hold their wings out horizontally and lift their tails to display the sharp points and white underparts. When they do a quick pitter-pat with their feet, their tail feathers quiver. Then they do a half turn and run. The males crouch and face off against each other occasionally jumping up or even fighting. Quite comical! One tribe of Indians does a dance that imitates these chickens. Some of us did a little chicken dancing to keep warm.

At Coal Canyon we had a picnic lunch and spent about an hour and a half looking for Chukar. We never found any but got good looks at some wild horses. Most of us had never seen the footprint of an unshod horse before. We did see Spotted Towhee, Brewers Sparrow, Black-throated Sparrow, and a Gray Flycatcher. I took a picture of an early blooming red paintbrush.

Next we went to Palisades for the Lewis's Woodpecker. I had seen this bird before from a distance, but many in our group were anxious to see it. We had good looks at several of them, and I realized that they are indeed handsome birds with rose-colored bellies. In another part of town, we visited Steve Borcius's orchard. He bands hummingbirds and has had as many as 43 nests of Black-chinned Hummingbirds. Both Black-chinned and Broad-billed Hummingbirds had been reported earlier, but we did not find them. It was very windy and the sand was blowing in my eyes, so I feared that I would not see any birds at all. I did finally manage to see an elusive Gamble's Quail. We could hear them calling "girrrlls", but it was quite a while before I saw one running, its head and topknot just barely visible behind the low sagebrush. Steve told us that his quails eat two gallons of seed a day. He invited us inside to use his facilities, and Barb discovered that Steve's wife is working on the same quilt that she has been making at home.

Afterward we drove on to Escalante Canyon, a beautiful place that Barb and I had visited when we were with the New Jersey Audubon group in 2000. We continued a futile search for Chukar, but eventually we lost interest and just enjoyed the scenery. I took a number of pictures of the

beautiful rock formations with names like “Kissing Rock”, “Dick Rock”, and “Table Rock”. Adrian wanted to turn around because we had a long drive ahead of us, but Barb kept egging him on, promising that we had seen the Chukar farther down the canyon. The scenery became more and more beautiful, so no one minded not seeing the target bird. However, birds were not entirely forgotten, and we enjoyed watching a Black Phoebe fly-catching over the water. We wondered what possible advantage the bird derives from the constant tail bobbing. At the very end there were interesting potholes in the bottom of the rocky streambed that were caused by the force of the water. We finally turned around and made our way back out of the canyon, stopping to take a picture of the beautiful red blooms of a cactus perched on a rock. It was late in the day when we finally reached Gunnison. It had been a long, but lovely day. No Chukar, however.

Friday, April 18

We were up well before dawn the next morning to get to the Gunnison Sage Grouse. Only a few years ago this species had been considered a subspecies of the Greater Sage Grouse. At the Birding Club of Delaware County banquet the night before our trip, I learned from David Sibley, the featured speaker, that he has never seen this rare bird and his lovely illustrations had been done from pictures and specimens. I had seen a female and young in 2000 but have never seen a male, certainly not a displaying male. Unfortunately, viewing conditions were poor. We had to stand behind a chest-high wall with screens that blocked our visibility except for a few openings. I was told I couldn't stand at the outer edge of the wall, so I had to set up behind Sandra. My only telescope view was through the screen. Thank goodness Sandra let me look through her scope a couple of times, so I got to see one of the males displaying. There were only five males and two females anyway. I did see the filoplumes, which are heavier than those on the Greater Sage Grouse, but I didn't see the difference in the tail feathers or the air sacks. They made a popping sound. All the birds left before dawn when the light would have created better viewing conditions. Perhaps they left early because a coyote was in the area. It didn't seem as if we birders disturbed the birds at all. The best part of the experience was hearing the winnowing of a snipe, a sound I had never heard before.

The worst part of the experience was the appearance of a hostile, angry landowner. He screamed at us, “Read the sign.” The sign referred to was one that he had made. It was a graph showing the increasing numbers of birders at the lek that corresponded to a decrease in the number of birds. His assumption was that the birders disturbed the birds. He did not consider other causes that might have caused the decline. He said the government should be managing the site and enforcing the rules. “This grouse will become extinct before it's listed as endangered.” Since Adrian said he was there last year, too, I wondered if he did this every day. I talked to some graduate student researchers who confirmed that there was a decline, but, on the other hand, they knew of ten other leks. When the numbers are low, there are too few males to stimulate the females, they said.

We left to go search for Sage Sparrows. We saw a Gunnison Prairie Dog, which has a somewhat different face from the White-tailed Prairie Dogs we've been seeing. We searched for the Sage Sparrow in the sage (lovely smell of sage), but saw mostly Sage Thrashers. A Sage Sparrow was

located with some juncos, but we had to chase it around to finally get a brief view of its chest spot and flickity tail.

In Montrose we stopped as usual at Safeway to pick up lunch. We had a good view of an Osprey flying over the supermarket parking lot. Lesson: nice birds can be found anywhere; always look up. Later on we stopped at the rest stop on Route 50 at the continental divide at Monarch Pass. Barb and I recalled being there three years ago. That was in July when the meadow was in bloom and full of butterflies. There were Lincoln and White-throated Sparrows in full song, as I recall. At this time it was definitely still winter with deep snow on the ground and snowflakes were falling.

We drove down into the valley where the weather was pleasant. We ate our picnic lunch at a beautiful spot along the Arkansas (Ar-KAN-sas) river. A low-flying Golden Eagle flew right over our heads and gave us a magnificent show. Unfortunately we were too distracted by the eagle to see the Violet-Green Swallows that Adrian had just spotted and they never came back.

At Temple Canyon I missed the Clark's Nutcracker again. However, I got to see an active group of Bushtits and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Looking for birds we walked off road in an isolated place where there were no human footprints and no trash. It was very quiet, not even the sound of airplanes--nature in its purest form.

We returned to the Canon City Riverwalk hoping for migrants, swallows, or other interesting birds. Unfortunately nothing much was around—just an Osprey (male without a necklace), a Solitary Sandpiper, and a few other species that we had seen before. We puzzled for a while over a Widgeon with odd plumage.

At the end of the day we stopped to buy some beer. When Adrian backed out of the parking place, we heard a loud crunch and thought that he had hit a post or possibly even another car. Adrian took a circuitous route through the parking lot (“car park”) and got out of there in a hurry, presumably so we wouldn't get caught. My regard for Adrian plummeted. Later when we were parked at the motel, I took a look at the bumper and couldn't see any damage. Adrian saw me and said, “Edie, you have been with me on many trips before. You know I always play this trick.” Nevertheless, it was the first time for me. He had slammed on the brakes and hit the side of the van with his hand. He had me and everyone else fooled.

Adrian was not done with his tricks that evening, however. At dinner at a Mexican restaurant, he had the waiter bring Kathy, a strict vegetarian, a double cheese hamburger. This is a woman who won't eat Jell-O because the gelatin is derived from animal bones. We all laughed heartily, Kathy included. On the way back in the van, we were still laughing so hard we couldn't stop. My sides ached. In retrospect, it's hard to see why we kept on laughing and laughing--for half an hour at least.

Saturday, April 19

We got to sleep in relatively late this morning since we weren't visiting any leks. However, since it was raining and snow and sleet were predicted, Adrian decided to drive north to get away from the storm. We stopped at Barr Lake State Park and saw a nice assortment of ducks. Our next stop was Meyers Ranch Open Space where we were told there were Three-toed Woodpeckers and Red-naped Sapsucker. The hike through the snow was invigorating and sometimes there were snow squalls; however, the birds were quiet so we saw little. We saw some fresh woodpecker holes, but no woodpeckers. The only bird of note was an out of range and rather sickly-looking Brewer' Sparrow that was foraging beside a little stream. Later we learned that it was likely the "Timberline" race of Brewer's that nests close to the timberline.

Next we drove to Crawford Gulch, a spot where we hoped to find the Northern Pygmy Owl. It was snowing heavily again as we walked up and down the road playing the tape of the owl's call. The wintry scene was lovely, but there wasn't any owl.

That evening before dinner we met in the lobby of our Georgetown motel to do the checklist. Barb had assembled a chicken costume for Adrian. Some magpie feathers were the filoplumes, two balloons were air sacks, and grocery paper bags were accordion folded to look like tail feathers. A surprised Adrian cooperated enthusiastically and danced around his lek for the pleasure of his females. We, the chicks of his van, paraded around, too, but pretended to take no notice of his antics. Barb videotaped the whole things; but, alas, she taped over it later. My pictures turned out to be blurry, so we have only our memories of this amusing scene.

After dinner Mike had a snowball fight with a little girl in a pink parka. She won, of course.

Sunday, April 20

This was Easter Sunday, the last day of the trip. Adrian had bought yellow marshmallow Easter bunnies for each of us. Naturally, we fed one to our pet shark, and I have a picture of it. He also gave us chocolate "eggs" for our final snacks. After checking the feeders around Georgetown, we went to the "Happy Cooker" (AKA "Happy Hooker") for a gourmet breakfast. Afterward we took pictures of Adrian and his "chicks" next to the sign for the restaurant.

After another unsuccessful attempt to drive up Guanella Pass for the White-tailed Ptarmigan, we drove back to Meyer Ranch. With the new fallen snow, the scene was lovely and offered an opportunity for more picture taking. We went up the trail again on the search for Three-toed Woodpecker and the Red-naped Sapsucker. We eventually spotted a handsome Red-naped Sapsucker on a pole, but we never found the Three-toed although there was evidence of its presence.

The Meyer Ranch was the final stop on this wonderful birding trip. We changed into travel clothes at a gas station in Aurora and left our shark behind in the bushes hoping some child would come along and adopt it. After cleaning out the van, we gave our leftover snacks to some hungry truckers. Then we were off to the airport where we said our final good-byes.