



COLORADO “Chicken Odyssey” - TRIP REPORT April 8-17, 2005

By Adrian Binns

Leaders: Adrian Binns and Mike Fritz

Day 1 / April 8:

After a sumptuous breakfast to remember we loaded the vans and headed north on our chicken odyssey with our first sighting being a pair of coyotes near the airport that had a look of content as if to say “that was a fine chicken breakfast”. The agricultural fields south of Greeley around Beebe Draw held small numbers of gulls including several Franklin’s, including one showing a brilliant pink wash. Kestrels and Western Meadowlarks seemed to be everywhere and the wetter areas held Killdeer, Mallards, Greater Yellowlegs and displaying Wilson’s Snipe. The conditions for viewing the Lower Latham reservoir were ideal though the thousands of waterfowl were mainly on the other side. Here we watched displaying Horned and Clark’s Grebes amongst Shovelers, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Redhead, Canvasback, Eared Grebe, Pintail, Ruddy Duck, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Common and Barrow’s Goldeneye, Bufflehead and Green-winged Teal. While White Pelicans were roosting, a lone Bonaparte’s Gull cruised the far shore and 3 American Bitterns took off out of the cattails and showed very well before descending into the marsh and out of sight. A short distance away another small marshy area hosted a dozen Yellow-headed Blackbirds and 3 pairs of courting Great-tailed Grackles. Across the street is Loloff reservoir and being smaller made it far easier to view the abundant waterfowl. American Avocets, mainly males, were busy feeding, both yellowlegs were activity feeding along the shoreline where a collection of peeps included individual Least, Semi-palmated and Western along with a dozen or so Baird’s Sandpipers. Among the other highlights were 3 species of teal, Blue-wing, Green-wing and Cinnamon, the later being the stars of this pond.

Reaching the Pawnee Grassland we were greeted by a large group of Pronghorn and several distant Burrowing Owls and a sitting light morph Rough-legged Hawk. Nearby a pair of Mountain Plovers delighted everyone by being very close to the road. A surprise was a Sage Thrasher that flew into a lone bush on the prairie and then came out and sat on the fence wire for a stunning view. The longspurs were our next target and it felt good to actually get out and walk the prairie. Horned Lark’s were everywhere and several times we flushed longspurs, but they kept landing too far away. Our persistence paid off when several finally landed close enough on top of thistles for quick views before dropping into the grasses where they eventually gave us spectacular looks as they feed. In the shorter grass fields we came across several dozen McGown’s as they

chased each other about occasionally landing close by. On our way out a Prairie Falcon was seen flying away and while looking for it a Ferruginous Hawk flew right over the vans which enabled us to see the dark legging. By the time we reached the campground the winds had picked up and we were dodging tumble weed as it crossed the road. At the campground we were rewarded with a small group of Mountain Bluebirds. Our final stop was at the Akron research center windbreak. A Townsend Solitaire stopped us in our tracks and while looking at that we notice 2 young Great Horned Owls in a nest low and close to the road. Getting out to look around we came across an adult Great Horned in the Pines as well as having a Long-eared Owl fly in front of us, never to be seen again. After dinner we attended the orientation at the Wray Museum for tomorrow mornings Great Prairie Chicken tour, that included a short film of them on the lek displaying.

Day 2 / April 9

The bus pulled out at 4:55am with 24 eager chicken lovers. Half an hour later we were positioning ourselves in the blind and soon after that the two large front panels were raised giving us a front row seat to watch an amazing spectacle. The cooing, cackling and booming began immediately and it was not long before there was just enough light to make out the dark figures of Greater Prairie Chickens. Half a dozen could be seen at first and as the light conditions got better the activity picked up and more were being seen. It was wonderful to have one male patrol a 10 yard area less than 40 feet from us. Being on the perimeter of the lek this was a young bachelor eagerly to test his skills for the first time to whoever would pay any attention to him. Having him so close enabled us to clearly hear his feet stamping on the ground, usually just after he had flown a few yards and just before he would bow and inflate his orange air sac as he raised his pinnae. On a few occasions he would be have another male come and confront him, and a minor face would follow occasionally ending with a little violence, but this was mainly males flexing their muscles. In all we counted 43 birds with 17 being females. The center of the lek was only 30 yards from us with about 4 males vying for the attention of about a dozen females. On this day we witnessed a total of 5 copulations that were likely all by the same dominant male. Meanwhile our frustrated testosterone filled feather friend continued to put on a show in front of us. At one stage a female walked right through his patch at an agonizingly slow pace no doubt teasing him, but it was not his lucky day as she continued through and on into the brush. Following this fabulous and extremely close show we had a sumptuous breakfast courtesy of the Kitzmiller Grazing Association and the ever gracious volunteers lead by the personable Russ. Around the farm Brown-headed Cowbird, Say's Phoebe, Vesper Sparrow and Ruby-crowned Kinglet were seen while walking off our huge breakfast.

At Bonny Lake the haze made it tough to view the thousands of waterfowl on the lake, but we did manage to see Long-billed Dowitchers, California Gull, and both Snow (lesser's) and Ross's Geese including a blue snow goose. The entrance road produced a pair of Wood Ducks and the windbreak had a nesting Long-eared Owl. Continuing around the lake, several Great Horned Owls were seen as well as Wild Turkey beside the road. We took our lunch at some campsite picnic table where a pair of Townsend

Solitaire's, Dark-eyed Junco and American Robins were feeding on junipers in a small narrow windbreak.

Hearing that the weather was going to take a turn for the worse over the next 36 hours we decided to head for the Campo lek and take our chances on the Lesser Prairie Chicken displaying in the afternoon. A quick stop en route to break up the long drive at NeeNoshe failed to produce the Snowy Plovers, more than likely due to the fact that it was overrun by fisherman on this brilliant sunny day. We did pick up distant White-faced Ibis as a consolation. Heading south a Ferruginous was seen close to the side of the road sitting on the ground with a 13-lined Ground Squirrel in its talons.

By the time we reached the lek around 5pm the wind had picked up considerably. 2 Lesser's were visible when we arrived, occasionally displaying and cackling and pooping their air sacs, though it was rather short in duration. 2 more appeared and were more cooperative, coming out from behind the yuccas for all of us to view. With the wind howling in our faces at a steady 30mph, we waited for them to pick up where they left off but the wind proved too strong and after an hour the 4 birds flew off together. On our way out we stopped by an abandoned building and had a pair of Barn Owls and a Yellow-rumped Warbler. We then visited a Ferruginous Hawk nestsite where we found a bird sitting on the ground not too far away, likely on prey. A Loggerhead Shrike was flying back and forth from the tree and leaving the Comanche Grasslands we came across a Chihuahuan Raven on a nest that had to have been 4 feet tall and 2 Long-billed Curlews – always a crowd pleaser!

Day 3 / April 10

After leaving the Campo Café and heading into the Comanche Grasslands, Bob realized he was without optics. A short detour and phone call later, they were located and we were on our way – again.

Heading into Cottonwood Canyon Bill spotted a flock of Pine Siskins that were feeding on a short stand of junipers out in the middle of nowhere. Our first stop in the canyon produced Cedar Waxwings, Townsend Solitaire's, Canyon Towhee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Bushtits, Downy Woodpecker, and Canyon Wren. We then stopped at the bridge over the creek and had several Wood Ducks, but little else. Farther along we tried for Ladder-backed Woodpecker, but had no response. We did get a Chipping Sparrow, Rock Wren, and Western Scrub Jay. We walked amongst the Cottonwoods nearby and had a pair of Bewick's Wren hanging out with a pair of Bushtits. Two Eastern Phoebe's perched nearby and we had them calling at the same time as a Say's Phoebe down by the creek. Pauline came across a male Vermillion Flycatcher which perched on a post for everyone to enjoy. Two species vocalized once for us, a Ladder-backed Woodpecker and a Western Screech Owl but neither showed themselves as the sky darkened and the threatening weather was about to descend upon us. On the way out we managed to get glimpses of a Roadrunner as it made it way through the junipers.

By now the weather, which turned out to be the Blizzard of 2005, had finally reached us and we slowly made our way across snow covered roads into Pueblo. On the grounds of the hotel in a howling wind and near freezing temperature we added Scaled Quail, Blue Jay and Pied-billed Grebe.

Day 4 / April 11

While loading up the vans after a sumptuous hotel breakfast we had a calling Curve-billed Thrasher but were unable to locate it. At the entrance to Brush Hollow a dozen Western Bluebirds were seen and along the entrance road several hundred Mountain Bluebirds covered the grassland. On the reservoir 5 Red-breasted Mergansers were spotted and an Osprey flew overhead. Beating the juniper bushes for birds, any bird, we managed to come across only a few on this beautiful morning, bushtits, Spotted Towhee, lots of Townsend's Solitaire's and finally several Juniper Titmouse that did their best to avoid us.

In Canon City the Valco Ponds were very productive as we picked up 6 species of swallows. Tree's were the most numerous and there were a handful of Rough-winged, Cliff, Violet-green, Barn and Banks, as they fed on an insect hatch over the pond. As most of the swallows began to disperse a large group of Franklin's Gulls circled overhead probably feeding on the remainder of the insects. On the western side of the city we had what turned out to be a very short stop for Rufous-crowned Sparrow, as a pair were seen very well foraging amongst the shrubs along the edge of the path just a few yards from the vehicles. Exiting the entrance road the ponds held a Pied-billed Grebe, Common Merganser and Shovelers. Another brief stop at Royal Gorge provided us with White-throated Swifts and spectacular views, but the highly anticipated Turkey Vultures were a no show. Instead we were rewarded with a pair of dark morph Red-tailed Hawks – not a bad trade!

While a great deal of Colorado was still under snow emergencies we had our picnic lunch at the Buena Vista overlook under gorgeous conditions and with spectacular scenery. It was not long before our lunch was interrupted by calling Pinyon Jay's which were quickly located and turned out to number over a hundred birds. Here we also picked up a White-breasted Nuthatch and had a Western Scrub Jay join us for lunch.

Following the beautiful Arkansas River through the river valley we pulled into Granite and quickly located Cassin's Finches, Black-capped and Mountain Chickadee's, Stellar's Jay along with Pink-sided, Oregon and Gray-headed Junco's. But it was the Brown-capped Rosy-finches that got us all excited as about a dozen were busy feeding on the ground and at feeders. This was great but it was not our usual feeder spot, so we headed down to check it out. Here we hit the motherlode of Rosy-finches as we watched hundreds come in from the rocky cliffs and land on the wires all in a row and then descend to the feeders. For an hour we watched in amazement as this reoccurred time and time again with more birds being added to the group as time went on. The majority were Brown-capped, but we had at least 4 Black's and 3 Gray-crowned along with 2 Hepburn's. At times we had all 4 in view at once. What a show! It was easy to

overlook the dozens of junco but amongst them were two Slate-colored, bring to 4 the number of subspecies seen there. While watching the rosy-finches a large group of Bighorn Sheep were watching us from the cliffs above and an Osprey migrated along the river.

Day 5 / April 12

A pre breakfast check of Georgetown neighborhood feeders produced the usual suspects and a distance calling Fox Sparrow. Following a most scrumptious breakfast at the Happy Cooker we only managed to get a few miles up the road to Guanella Pass as the snow plows were busy clearing snow. Along the stream we did manage the briefest of views of an American Dipper. We headed up to Loveland Pass but though it was clear we only managed a pair of Brown-capped Rosy Finch.

In Granby we came across our first Bald Eagle, a third year bird. At Windy Gap Reservoir three-quarters of the water was frozen which made it easier for us to view the waterfowl as the birds were that much closer. There were 2 distinct groups of goldeneyes, one Common and another Barrow's with at least 20 birds in it. It gave us great comparisons of the two and it was nice to see both of them displaying. Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Eared Grebe and California Gull rounded out the other species on the water while a Peregrine was seen overhead.

Heading north Pauline spotted a Gray Jay besides the road and after relocating it there turned out to be 5 of them. As we approached the Arapaho NWR 3 Golden Eagles were seen soaring above the road. These were our first golden's of the trip so everyone was excited but little did we know that by the end of the day we would come across half a dozen more. Sage Thrasher's were seen regularly along the wildlife drive along with numerous Wyoming Ground Squirrels and White-tailed Prairie Dogs. On the ponds there was an assortment of the usual ducks.

Walden Reservoir was frozen with only 3 American Avocets, a Yellow-rumped Warbler and a Muskrat along the edge. After checking into our hotel in Walden we headed out towards Coalmont where along raptor alley it seemed as though every third telegraph pole held a Rough-legged Hawk, along with Golden Eagle and dark morph Swainson's Hawk.

On the road to the Greater Sage Grouse lek we spotted 5 females besides the road, where they blended into the sage extremely well. On the lek itself there were more Pronghorn than Sage Grouse, but 4 males did use the lek to hone their skills, while several other males and females were hanging out in the sage. Nearby another group, this time consisting of about 30 birds were taking their duties more seriously and we decided this would be our best place to view them in the morning. On the way out several White-tailed Jackrabbits were seen dodging our vehicle.

Day 6 / April 13

We arrived at the lek at 5:30am and the Greater Sage were visible besides the road. Our vantage point allowed us to view 4 dominate males, surrounded by 17 females, continuously displaying. At times other males would try to enter into their 'lek' only to be driven away. Sub-ordinate males were displaying all over and we were literally surrounded by displaying males with their popping sounds being clearly heard. At one stage a Bald Eagle flushed about 70 birds at the far end of the lek and we estimated that there were a total of around 200 birds all told. On this beautiful clear morning the spectacle that was in front of us was truly one of the great avian wonders, not only because of the sheer numbers of birds but the fact that everywhere we looked these majestic birds we around us displaying or interacting between themselves in one form or another in a gorgeous setting.

Heading west towards Steamboat Springs a quick stop on Rabbitt Ears pass produced a few Mountain Chickadee's and Flicker's and Mike heard Red Crossbills but little else. The scrumptious breakfast in the heart of town was appreciated by everyone. After picking up lunch we made our way along the winding Elk creek where at one point we had a Sandhill Cranes following us overhead for several miles. Stopping at feeders we picked up White-breasted Nuthatch, Hairy Woodpecker (the rockies race) and the first of numerous mammals today, Least Chipmunk. Dipper's were plentiful as we watched 4 pairs in all feeding, preening, swimming and nest building. Overhead a pair of Red-tails were ever present, while a Golden Eagle glided along the ridge, Swainson's Hawk flew by and a male Northern Goshawk put on a nice show. A first for our 'chicken trip' were 3 Band-tailed Pigeons and Red-breasted Nuthatch, Stellar's Jay, Mountain Chickadee and American Goldfinch rounded out the birds and Yellow-bellied Marmot, Red Fox, Red Squirrel were added to the mammal species and Hoary Comma to the butterfly list.

On the way to Hayden we saw an adult Bald Eagle perched on its huge stick nest and at our Blue Grouse spot we were not disappointed as Jack and Marie found a male. Once everyone saw it it took off and was never relocated. Two Greater Sage Grouse were also seen here as were Western Scrub Jay, Spotted Towhee, Bushtit and Mountain Bluebird. Mule Deer, Pronghorn, Elk and Porcupine. Mike found a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel and Naomi got really excited over finding a Sheridan's Hairstreak.

Day 7 / April 14

Another early morning start saw us at the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek while it was still dark. As it began to get light we could see activity on the crest of the hill where the lek was. The light wind was enough to keep us from hearing their calls, but we could a lot of activity as there was about 30 birds on the lek. The grouse would stop and stare at each other before resuming their display by spreading their wings, cocking their tails to show the white undertail and bowing their heads before spinning around and eventually taking off in a straight line for a short distance. Several females drew the attention of a number of males and at least one of the sub-ordinate males opted to fly across the short valley

towards us and land in the taller grass a short distance from where we were standing but for most of the time it was out of sight.

Pulling into Coal Canyon we quickly located a couple of Chukars as they were calling a short distance up the canyon's rocky scree. 4 in all were seen. We did well with sparrows including the beautiful Black-throated and later amongst the junipers and sage a Brewer's and Lark Sparrow. Ravens and displaying Golden Eagles graced the upper elevations of the canyon walls on this gorgeous day while the strangest sight was finding a group of about 100 Black Rosy-finches on the move half way up the canyon. Amongst the other finds in the canyon, a colorful Spotted Towhee, numerous butterflies including Southern Dogfaces and Checkered Skippers, Say's Phoebes and Bewick's and Rock Wrens.

The orchards were fruitful with Lewis' Woodpeckers and Gambel's Quails while at Confluence Park Osprey, Pied-billed Grebes, Cinnamon Teal, Black-winged Stilts and Common Merganser graces the water. A final stop along Blue Mesa Lake produced Bald Eagles on the ice with Greater Yellowlegs and Franklin's Gulls along the waters edge. In the sage near where we parked there were several singing Sage Thrashers.

Day 8 / April 15

We meet Clinton at 4:40 and headed to the Waunita Hot Springs lek where on this very still morning and under clear skies we began to hear Gunnison's Sage Grouse booming at about 5:35. About 18 birds were on the lek and we were able to see 3 copulations. At 6:55 the sunrise came over the hill which allowed us to clearly see the stronger contrasting markings on the tails of these smaller sage grouse as well as the thick, long filoplumes that get flicked over the back of their heads at the end of their display. By 7:10 half the group took off to the north, leaving about 8 birds, all of whom flew away minutes later.

Over Monarch Pass we came across Clarke's Nutcrackers, 4 Red Crossbills, Gray Jays, a Goshawk and some of the group got to see an American Three-toed Woodpecker. The afternoon was spent walking the Riverwalk in Canon City coming across a wide assortment of species including both races of Yellow-rumped Warblers, Pine Siskins, Lesser Goldfinch, Song and Swamp Sparrow, Eastern and Black Phoebe which was a pleasant surprise. A Blue Jay was an equally surprising sight in this location and a Marsh Wren was heard along the reeds that bordered the river. On and over the water we found a Belted Kingfisher, Osprey and both Cinnamon and Blue-wing Teal.

Back at our motel we searched and found a Curve-billed Thrasher in the adjacent neighborhood before heading to dinner. After dinner most of the group opted to go in search of Western Screech Owl, which was soon located and very cooperative, making for a great end to a wonderful day.

Day 9 / April 16

After another scrumptious breakfast at our hotel we stopped at Starbucks for some much needed nourishment and continued north through a mix of fog and clear weather. It was clean up day today! A run to higher elevation filled in some of the holes on our list. The aspen grove produce one stunning male Red-naped Sapsucker that just posed for pictures on this picture perfect morning. Once we were above the treeline it didn't take long before we located White-tailed Ptarmigan resting in a patch of willow about 250 yards away. Blending in perfectly these white lumps metamorphosed into birds when viewed through scopes. A careful count actually revealed 29 of them, all in one field of view. It was a life bird for almost everyone and we celebrated with dark chocolate (as usual). The setting on the bright sunny day, with the surrounding mountain peaks and stunning scenery made a fitting backdrop for this much sought after species.

At Genesee Park the stately Ponderosa Pines with patches of snow, remnants from the Blizzard of 2005 only a few days earlier, made for a great location for our picnic lunch. Bill and Naomi finished their lunch in the van on the way and strolled down through the pines in search of sapsuckers while we ate. By the time we were assembling to go look for them, Bill reached us huffing and puffing and could barely contain his excitement. They had located a tree with 4 species nesting in it along with 2 pairs of Williamson's Sapsuckers. The sapsuckers had already completed their hole and were periodically returning to check it out. A Pygmy Nuthatch was busy putting the finishing touches on the interior decoration while White-breasted Nuthatches were working on a crevice created by a lightning strike, and a pair of Western Bluebirds were nesting in a hole that was previous used – it was an avian condominium. Brown Creeper was heard and a flyover Evening Grosbeak was seen to round out an amazing hour of behavioral observation. Our next stop was to look for a Northern Pygmy Owl, but our string success had to end at some point, and it was here.

Day 10 / April 17

Our final day was spent returning to look for Pygmy Owl but without success and finally at Barr Lake which was surprisingly quiet, before heading to the airport, following a very successful tour of Colorado.