



Sunrise Birding LLC
COLORADO
April 7 – 17, 2015
TRIP REPORT
Report by Gina Nichol





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Trip Report

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Cover photos left to right:
Greater Sage Grouse
Mountain Plover
Greater Prairie Chicken
Fantastic group!

Leaders: Wezil Walraven, Steve Bird & Gina Nichol

Distance traveled: 2243 miles

Species recorded: 140 including 5 heard only

Lifers logged (per person): Between 0 and 52!

Temperature range encountered: 20 – 80 degrees F

Top birds of the trip as voted by participants (each person picking their top 3)

- 1) Greater Sage Grouse (10 votes)**
- 2) Greater Prairie Chicken (5 votes)**
- 3) Lewis's Woodpecker & American Three-toed Woodpecker (4 votes each)**
- 4) Broad-tailed Hummingbird, White-tailed Ptarmigan, Mountain Plover (3 votes each)**
- 5) Gunnison Sage Grouse, American Dipper, McCown's Longspur (2 votes each)**
- 6) Chestnut-collared Longspur, Dusky Grouse, Scaled Quail, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Swainson's Hawk (male and female perched together), Franklin's Gull, Black-throated Sparrow, Mountain Bluebird, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Black Rosy Finch (1 vote each)**

Our 2015 chicken trip was a smashing success logging all of the target birds and so much more. The group was easy going and good natured as we navigated the plains and mountains of Colorado with ease and great weather for the most part. Below is the day by day log of the trip. Photos identified in bold and by Gina Nichol unless otherwise noted.

Day 1: All arrived in Denver by mid-afternoon so we took the opportunity to leave a little early for Pueblo. With Wezil and Steve at the wheel and Gina navigating, we traveled south and soon the massive, snow-covered Pike's Peak came into view. We used our extra time for a bonus birding stop at the **Garden of the Gods Park**, a National Natural Landmark in Colorado Springs. The scenery alone was





worth the stop with stunning red sandstone rock formations created during a geological upheaval millions of years ago rising from the landscape. As we got out of the vans we heard and immediately saw numerous **White-throated Swifts** (Photo: Steve Bird) flying over the formations. Several Common Ravens were flying around and a Cooper's Hawk flew over. We walked a short trail and set our sights on a cliff face and in a few minutes a Prairie Falcon flew in and perched long enough for good scope views of the bird. Passersby were interested in what we were doing so we invited

them to look and each was impressed. The Prairie Falcon flew off allowing us to notice the Black-billed Magpie that was perched at eye level not far away between two stick nests. As the sun was getting low in the sky, we continued our journey to Pueblo ticking a roadside Western Scrub Jay on our way out. We enjoyed a nice dinner at a Mexican restaurant and settled in to our hotel for the night.

Day 2: This morning we spent some time exploring the arid scrub around Pueblo and its outskirts. We slowly cruised a dirt road near a housing development where we had nice looks at several Scaled Quail including four that approached close to the vans. Horned Larks were around and a Say's Phoebe was seen well as it perched on a cholla cactus and sallied for insects in the morning sun. A Loggerhead Shrike perched on an evergreen shrub caught our attention so we stopped to check it out. It flew but a pair of **Curve-billed Thrashers** came in and got up close and personal with us as they perched and inspected us from a fence post a few feet away. A Western Scrub Jay flew across the road in front of us and caught the morning light nicely. A small herd of Pronghorn Antelope grazed in the distance again in good light but a little far away.



From here we moved south stopping for a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds with a few nice looking male Yellow-headed Blackbirds mixed in. Collared Doves and White-crowned Sparrows (Rocky Mountain race - *Zonotrichia leucophrys oriantha*) were seen around this farm area. Further on, we stopped for a Bald Eagle perched on a power pole and wondered why it wasn't making a meal of a Rock Squirrel that sat below. A Northern Harrier was seen coursing over a field as we moved on.

A stop at Holbrook Reservoir proved very productive with many Western Grebes and at least one Clark's Grebe. White Pelicans were in their breeding finery and there were distant Ruddy Ducks, Redheads, Cinnamon Teal, Blue-winged Teal and a Pied-billed Grebe. We made our way around to the other side of the lake to get closer to the birds and found a small flock of Western Sandpipers with one or two Least Sandpipers mixed

in. There were several American Avocets in their handsome breeding plumage and we saw Marbled Godwits in the shallows and Common Mergansers in the deeper water. Adam found a flock of **Franklin's Gulls** that dropped in and we enjoyed good views of these breeding plumage birds with their stunning pink breasts in the mid-day light. Two Long-billed Curlews flew in, male and female showing difference in bill shape and length. Three Snowy Plovers were running around the sand bar and we were glad to have ventured around the lake to find these birds.



After lunch at the beloved Subway in La Junta we headed out of town stopping for a for Chihuahuan Raven on a power post showing it's white neck feathers. We crossed the plains and noted the requisite dust devils, tumbleweeds and our first Burrowing Owls of the trip. At Adobe Creek Reservoir, we scanned the open landscape from several locations along the road. It was sunny but incredibly windy and try as we may we could not spot our target here. We slowly turned around to check another area and as we cruised the road Steve Broker spotted a bird about 50 feet back on the left. We reversed and found a fairly close pair of **Mountain Plovers**! We watched them at close range and enjoyed fabulous views. Steve was our hero of the moment and Wezil commented that he had never seen the birds so well. We worked around to the lake to check for shorebirds but could only come up with Vesper Sparrow.



Day 3: This morning Wezil had coffee and snacks ready for us to tide us over for our very early start to visit the **Lesser Prairie Chicken** lek. We drove under starlit skies to Holly, Colorado to meet Fred Dorencamp of Arena Dust Tours and boarded an old school bus to travel to the lek. For what seemed like forever, Fred drove the straight road and then at one point turned off onto a dirt road. He asked us to lower the windows on one side of the bus and



then parked in the dark. We could already hear some of the noises and as the day light came up we started to see dark forms about 75 yards from the bus. With more and more light the shapes morphed into Lesser Prairie Chickens and we watched as six males danced and displayed in the field. A lone female stayed on the outskirts of the “stage” and we watch the antics of the males for more than an hour with binoculars and scopes. It was a much enjoyed show and many photos were attempted in the low light conditions.



Around 7 AM, we headed back towards Holly to get our vehicles and we followed **Fred** toward his ranch. A Merlin flew alongside us briefly as we drove and then shot off. We arrived at the ranch and were greeted by **Fred’s smiling wife Norma** who was waiting with a delicious hot breakfast for us. Later on we returned to the hotel to pack up and head north toward Wray. The drive was a little monotonous with mile after mile of mostly straight roads that cut through wide open fields.

We eventually found Bonny Lake State Wildlife Area (where the lake no longer exists!) and followed the road in stopping for yellow-shafted Northern Flickers, a Say’s Phoebe and a pair of Eastern Bluebirds. We saw several Northern Harriers coursing over the dry lake-bed below us. A herd of Mule Deer raced across the grasses and crossed the road ahead of us. Other than a few Turkey Vultures, there were few birds so we decided to continue toward Wray but not before Susan spotted something in a tree which turned out to be a **Porcupine**. As we watched and photographed it, Gina noticed a second Porcupine on the ground and we were thrilled to get such good views of this bonus animal.



We arrive at Wray around 4 PM and checked into our motel. After a little rest we reconvened to go to the Bledsoe Cattle Company office where Bob Bledsoe

talked to us about his ranching operation and the multiple Greater Prairie-Chicken leks there. Bob then took us out to one of the leks and as we approached more than two dozen Greater Prairie Chickens flew off. Two Burrowing Owls were also seen and we surveyed the situation briefly in preparation for our visit the next morning.

Day 4: This morning we were up early for our “official visit” to the **Bledsoe Greater Prairie-Chicken lek.** We arrived in the dark and set up in the car blinds and vans and soon we began to hear the booming of the chickens and see the dark forms moving around the open ground in front of us. A pair of Burrowing Owls was fighting near a hole and one would emerge now and then to take a look at the bizarre scene of



the chickens dancing. As the light began to come up, we could see several males stomping, strutting, dancing and fighting around the lek. Up to 31 birds were counted during our visit including 3 females. We enjoyed the antics for a couple of hours while the sun slowly lit the lek and another bright, sunny, perfect day unfolded. At least 10 times, a Greater Prairie Chicken flew up and landed on the top of one of the vans and as the females appeared, the activity became more intense. A pair of Coyotes appeared on the far ridge and looked at the show but moved off instead of helping themselves to breakfast.



We had breakfast in town and then headed toward Pawnee Grasslands stopping to look at a soaring Rough-legged Hawk along the way. We explored some roads around Pawnee and had good views of both Chestnut-collared and McCown’s Longspurs. Continuing on, we traveled into the Rocky Mountains passing through Greeley where two large groups of White Pelicans were kettling above the city. We had a delicious dinner at a pizza restaurant in Idaho Springs and continued on to Silverthorne (8,970 feet) for the night.



Day 5: We awoke to a crisp, clear morning with the sun lighting up the snow covered peaks we could see from our hotel. After breakfast we loaded the vans and headed up into the hills above Silverthorne to look for Rosy Finches. We drove into a residential area where homeowners had feeding stations and as we got to the end of the road the birds were just beginning to arrive. A flock of mostly **Gray-crowned Rosy Finches** (Photo: Steve Bird) came into a tall pine and preened as we worked through them trying to find a Brown-capped. At least one was spotted but the light on the birds was bad and we

wanted better views. A Sharp-shinned Hawk suddenly rocketed in, dispersing all of the finches revealing just how many birds were there. The flocks circled around several times but would not return to the pine while the Sharp-shinned was there. We walked up the street to see a small flock of Pine Grosbeaks in good light at the top of a pine. A Red Crossbill was also seen perched atop a pine and we had Pygmy Nuthatch, Mountain and Black-capped Chickadee, Steller's Jay, Gray Jay, and Dark-eyed Junco (Gray-headed subspecies). The Sharp-shinned finally departed and the flock of Rosy Finches came back, this time mostly Brown-capped. One Black Rosy Finch was seen to the delight of Paul, as it was his first lifer of the trip.

By 9 am we were heading up to Loveland Pass to search for the White-tailed Ptarmigan. Conditions could not have been better with sunny skies and no wind to speak of. We scanned at the summit and searched for at least an hour wondering how we could ever pick out a white bird in this snow-covered landscape. We heard a few calls but could not track the bird down. Finally we convened near the parking lot and Steve descended the hill to investigate some calls that he heard. He radioed to Wezil who had moved up to the

next pull-off and Wezil also walked down the slope and was soon pointing out the bird to us. It took a while to find it but Roberta finally got it in the scope and we got everyone on it. We took some time and admired the sight of a **White-tailed Ptarmigan** (Photo: John Schwarz) camouflaged against the snow and some sparse weeds. We trained more scopes on it and all enjoyed good views and breathed a sigh of relief for getting another chicken under our belts.



We continued over the other side of the pass, back toward Silverthorne and on toward Buena Vista stopping for some nice looking Mountain Bluebirds on the way. Our lunch



stop yielded views of up to 18 Ravens over a distant ridge doing tandem flights and barrel rolls. A neighborhood stop in Buena Vista offered two **Lewis's Woodpeckers** nesting in some large cottonwoods. The views of these birds were amazing and cameras clicked away. We continued on toward Gunnison stopping for Clark's Nutcracker, Swainson's Hawk, and Bald Eagle on the way. We arrived in Gunnison in the late afternoon and after checking in, we met to catch up on our checklist and welcome Tina to the tour. It was another fabulous day!

Day 6: This morning was more of a leisurely day as we birded around Gunnison and worked on catching Tina up on some of the birds she missed by arriving a few days late on the tour. The hotel offered breakfast starting at 7 AM and soon after we departed for Almont where we saw upwards of 7 American Dippers at two locations on the river. A Mink quickly disappeared under a bridge, at least three Great Blue Herons flew over and we had nice views of a Red-naped Sapsucker in town on a telegraph pole. Some Mountain Chickadees were seen in the large spruces in the village. Later on, we continued toward Crested Butte. On the way Steve found a Yellow-bellied Marmot that hid when we stopped the van to take a look.



In Crested Butte during a pit stop we noticed a number of birds in some trees beyond the parking lot. It looked like they might be visiting a feeder so we walked over to get good views of **Brown-capped Rosy Finch** (Photo: Steve Bird) and several female Cassin's Finches. We drove around town but there were no feeding stations to speak of except one that was empty but surrounded by Cassin's Finches including some nice looking males. On the way back, the second van had great views of a closely perched red-shafted Northern Flicker. We stopped at the Five Mile River Access at Gunnison National

Forest. The scenery was great but birding was quiet except for some Steller's Jays, a Clark's Nutcracker, Turkey Vultures about the ridge, a few Tree Swallows flying around and another Red-naped Sapsucker in the background. The next stop along the side of the road produced an adult male Williamson's Sapsucker and a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches. At the Gunnison Nature Trail we had great views of two Townsend Solitaires and a pair of **American Three-toed Woodpeckers** (Photo: Steve Bird). A Cooper's Hawk was seen as it flew over the far ridge. Heading back to Gunnison for lunch we stopped for a small tight herd of Elk in the middle of a large field.





After lunch we headed out to **Blue Mesa Reservoir** and found Common Merganser, Common Goldeneye, Ring-billed Gull and Ruddy Duck. We stopped to photograph the incredible scenery and watched two Gadwall fly in where a Pied-billed Grebe was diving close to shore. At the dam we had great views of male and female Mountain Bluebirds and Say's Phoebe. A little further on we walked out on an overlook over the canyon and had White-

throated Swifts flying below us, some coming very close at eye level. A Golden Eagle soared across the river offering great views. On the way back, some saw a Western Grebe and we stopped for 28 Buffleheads in the reservoir, Lesser Scaup and more common Goldeneye. Back in Gunnison we reviewed the list and went to dinner with the Gunnison lek intern Daniel. It was early to bed so that we could rise early for our time in the viewing trailer.



Day 6: Well before dawn we met our two guides for the Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek in the hotel parking lot. They led us to the lek outside of town. The sky was clear and full of stars and a few shooting stars with temperatures that were very chilly but there was no wind. We piled into the trailer and positioned ourselves, scopes trained on the shutters which were lifted while it was still dark. We scanned the landscape and soon were able to make out the shapes of the **Gunnison Sage-Grouse** up on the ridge. The males were very large with tails fanned and as the light improved we could see their



trains and the jerking movements as they displayed. The views were distant but we could see everything including some interactions between males and females. In between, we had Wilson's Snipe winnowing, Song Sparrows singing, a Least Chipmunk feeding on top of a sage and the ever present Western Meadowlark singing. We watched, scoped and tried to photograph the Gunnison Sage Grouse but mostly we enjoyed the spectacle and our chance to see this very rare bird. There were 25 there



that morning, not a bad turnout. Around 7:30 AM, the intern gave us the OK to leave the trailer and outside we heard and then found a Sage Thrasher perched and singing on top of a sagebrush. A Golden Eagle flew over toward the lek with a Swainson's Hawk close behind and harassing it.

We slowly thawed out and returned to the hotel for breakfast and then loaded the vans to head toward the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. Highlights of the drive included two very close

Golden Eagles and a pair of kissing **Yellow-bellied Marmots**. We arrived at Black



Canyon and stopped at an overlook to admire the view and take yet more pictures. A call caught our attention at the end of the parking lot and soon we were admiring a Spotted Towhee perched up and showing off for us. We walked up the road and saw an adult male Dusky Grouse cross the road ahead of us. Steve spotted it in the brush but it flew off quickly. We moved to a campsite area where we heard and then saw a male **Broad-tailed Hummingbird** (Photo: Steve Bird) that perched nicely for us.

Wezil motioned us ahead to see a female **Dusky Grouse** sitting in the shade near a picnic table. Further

on, a male was seen doing the same and we were amazed at how seemingly tame these birds were. A Fox Sparrow was singing and Gina tracked it down and coaxed it to perch right in front of us.

From here we continued toward Grand Junction stopping for lunch at Butch's Café in Delta where we were warmly greeted and fed. As we approached Grand Junction the sandstone cliffs of the Colorado National Monument came into view. We checked into our hotel after a long and productive day.



Day 7: Our morning was spent in the spectacular landscape of Colorado National Monument just outside of Grand Junction. Our first stop at the beginning of the entrance road yielded a very cooperative, singing **Black-throated Sparrow**. We ascended into the park taking in the awesome scenery lit up by the morning sun. Halfway up to the rim, we stopped and walked a short trail picking up a group of busy Bushtits and a Juniper Titmouse. The Canyon Wren that was singing from across the canyon refused to come over but a **Rock Wren** was very obliging. For the duration of our visit, there were White-throated Swifts whirling around the canyon sometimes above, sometimes below eye level. Further on we took a dirt side road that offered good views of Bewick's Wren, Hairy Woodpecker, and a fly over Pinyon Jay. We worked our way all the way up the Visitor Center and then to the campground where we saw our first Violet-green Swallows and some saw a quickly departing Peregrine Falcon. We took in more scenery and then made our way back along the Rim Road descending out of the park to a nice neighborhood where we found a house with a busy feeding station. New there were Gambel's Quail and White-crowned Sparrow.



From Grand Junction, we headed out to Coal Creek Canyon to look for Chukar and it wasn't long until Gina had one in our sights. Steve spotted another one across the road but neither offered prolonged views. It was time for lunch so we traveled to Mesa and ate at the Wagon Wheeler. On our way out we had some White-tailed Prairie Dogs.

We continued on toward Craig picking up a few Golden Eagles along the way. Dinner was at a nice Italian restaurant and we retired later than intended in preparation of our early departure in the morning.

Day 8: Once again we were up and out to get to the roadside Sharp-tailed Grouse lek before dawn. In Colorado, the subspecies is *jamesi* or Plains Sharp-tailed Grouse (there are six subspecies in North America). Light snow had fallen overnight (the first of the trip!) and we drove through the darkness to the right spot and pulled off the side of the road and waited for daylight. As the light came up, we scanned the gray landscape for birds. We could hear their noises and soon realized that the birds were close - right beside the road just inside the farm fence. For the next hour we watched the performance as males leapt into the air and did their foot stomps and



bowing displays. There were nearly 20 birds in all and at one point the display was frenetic with females flying in and males giving their best shows.

The party was still going when we finally left to check another lek. On the way, we had our first of several Sandhill Cranes for the day. There were a handful of Sharp-tailed Grouse on the next lek and we found a nice Northern Harrier (Gray Ghost) with prey, Mountain Bluebirds and Pronghorn Antelope. We had breakfast at the hotel, packed up the vans and headed toward Walden through falling snow. Once we reached Rabbit Ears Pass and the Continental Divide the snow had ended and the sun came out but the wind up at the top was fierce and only a few people got out for pictures near the sign. We continued through some open sage brush habitat and had several Swainson's Hawks and a Rough-legged Hawk along the road.



We checked into our lovely western style hotel in Walden and quickly departed to the local reservoir which offered a bonanza of birds. The first little pond held Northern Pintail, Canada Goose, Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal, Killdeer, Green-winged Teal, American Avocet and American Coot. The larger lake held hundreds, perhaps thousands of birds and we spent some good time there going through the various ducks and other water birds. There were groups of White Pelicans perched along the edge of

the lake as well as flying around. Ducks included Canvasback, Northern Shoveler, Redhead, Bufflehead, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, and Northern Pintail. Four grebes present included Pied-billed, Eared, Horned and Western and there were a few Double-crested Cormorants. A white goose with

black wing tips flew in and skirted around the Pelicans before in landed on the far shore. Try as we may, it was too distant to get the necessary detail to confirm it as a Ross's Goose. In the meantime, several very fine looking **California Gulls** came over to avail themselves of our breakfast leftovers and this allowed close study and great photos. After straining to see the white goose, we decided to move as close as we could to see it and with scopes and photographs we confirmed that it was indeed a Ross's Goose. As we loaded the vans, a Yellow-headed Blackbird flew by.



Later on we went to check the conditions at the Greater Sage Grouse lek. Along the way we had more studies of Swainson's Hawks and a group of Long-billed Curlew in a farm field. We headed back to town in the late afternoon and rested up before enjoying a wonderful dinner in a local café.



Day 9: For the final time, we were up and in the van before dawn for our last chicken of the tour. We drove in the dark to the **Greater Sage-Grouse** (Photo: Steve Bird) lek. As previously, we arrived at the lek location in the dark and waited tolerantly for daylight. It was overcast and chilly with a light wind and we were glad to stay in the vehicles with the heat on. As the light came up two more vehicles arrived. It was a British group that we had seen yesterday in the hotel. They pulled in behind us and waited as well. It wasn't long before we could make out the shapes of the grouse as they gathered on the lek. The males were displaying and the

females were forming a circle in the middle of the lek. We inched a little closer for better views and then the unthinkable happened. The second British vehicle flashed its super bright halogen lights flushing the birds and all but two flew into the adjacent sagebrush. What the #\$&*!?! In disbelief and disappointment, we scanned the sagebrush. We could still see the birds and in a few minutes the males began displaying again in the sagebrush but it was in bad light and further away than before. Wezil tried to console us saying that the birds would return to the lek and, in time, several of them did. In the end, we were well entertained with close views of the large males displaying in their inimitable style. The show was amazing and indeed this species was voted top bird of the trip. The crisis was averted but we could see the potential disruption by spectators



and pondered how it might impact the longevity and success of this lek. At breakfast, a state wildlife office visited us and we discussed the situation with her. The leader of the British group apologized to our group for the incident saying the same thing happened when they visited last year (really?). They apparently did not know how to control the lights of their vehicle.

We finished breakfast and packed up to head back toward Denver. The skies were dark gray and we had reports of snow ahead of us. By the time we reached the Moose Visitor Center at State Forest State Park it was snowing fairly heavily. The birds were crowded at the feeders and we had close looks at Brown-capped Rosy Finch, gray-headed and pink sided Dark-eyed Junco, Steller's Jay, Cassin's Finch, **Red-winged Blackbird**, Mountain Chickadee and a bonus Brewer's Sparrow. We had a nice session at the Visitor Center but



knew we had to get moving to get through the snow storm. By the time we got back on the road, we were traveling in white-out conditions and this continued for about 40 miles as we ascended over Cameron Pass and down the mountains. For the first time in the



trip, we experienced Colorado's crazy, severe spring weather but our excellent drivers Steve and Wezil got us through safely. At lower elevations, the snow turned to large wet flakes. At one point, Bill yelled from the back, "Horned Sheep" as he spotted four Bighorn Sheep on the hillside. We got out in the snow and watched the sheep foraging along the hill and were pleased to have finally seen them.

We continued on to Denver and checked into our hotel for the final night of the tour. Before dinner, we met to review the list and the top species of the tour and then enjoyed an excellent dinner at Ted's Montana Grill. We said our good-byes and parted ways with so many fabulous memories of our chicken pursuit.

Thanks to all of the participants for their enthusiasm, flexibility, promptness and good nature as we saw all of seven target chickens and three Rosy Finches. Special thanks go to Wezil for his leadership and navigating us more than 2200 miles around Colorado and Steve for his superb birding and driving skills. This will be a trip we long remember!

Gina Nichol, Sunrise Birding LLC