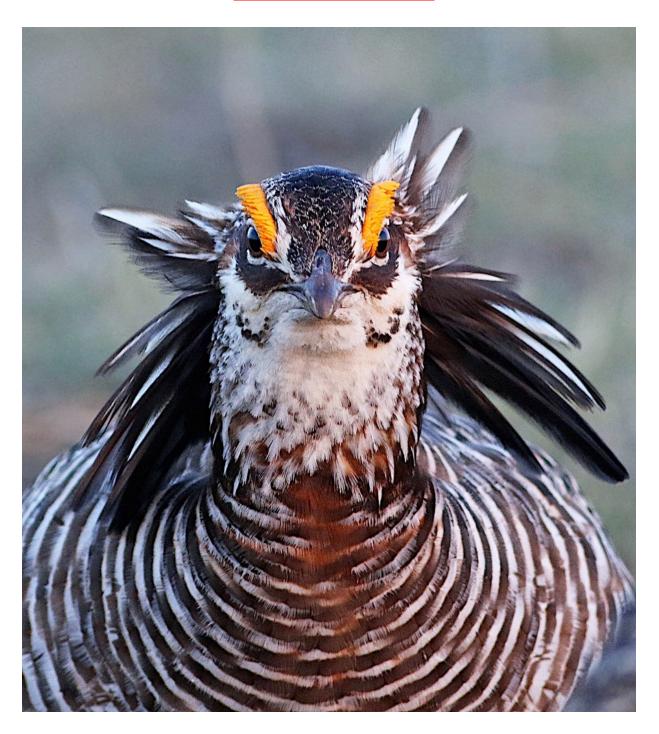


Colorado



April 11 – 19, 2015 Guided by Andrew Spencer All photographs in this report taken by the guide

Our Colorado tour, which in 2015 we ran for the fifth year in a row, is perhaps the best in the US for variety. Perhaps not a huge variety in final trip list, but variety in scenery, habitat, and different avian behaviors. As always we had not only unmatched views of the many grouse that make this tour so special, but also the mix of east and west, desert to mountain to wetland, and spring and winter that typify this great state. The unparalleled spectacle that makes up the annual ritual of grouse dancing was the clear highlight of course, but other species such as all three Rosy-Finches, a surprise Northern Goshawk, colorful Lewis's Woodpeckers and cryptic Mountain Plovers, and a good dose of mammals, all made for an unforgettable trip!

Day 1 - Denver to Silverthorne to Wray

Our first in a string of early mornings began with us leaving our hotel in Denver and beginning our first ascent up the Rockies. It wasn't long before we exited the interstate at our first stop at Genesee Mountain Park, and rolled into some gorgeous Ponderosa woodland. The pine forests in the foothills above Denver offer a good selection of typical western specialties, and Genesee was no exception – we had barely left the car before we found our only **Western Bluebirds** of the tour, along with some noisy **Pygmy Nuthatches** and some "**Gray-headed**" **Dark-eyed Juncos**.

Moving up to the main parking area, we fanned out in search of main target. It didn't take me long to become worried as the search started to take longer than planned, but eventually we prevailed and a pair of **Williamson's Sapsuckers** showed beautifully! A singing **Pine Grosbeak** was a surprise (usually they're only found higher up "the hill"), and a single flyover **Evening Grosbeak** ended up being our only one of the tour.

Leaving the foothills and heading up – way up – to Loveland Pass, we again piled out of the car looking for our next target. The difference could not have been more stark. Gone were the pine trees, woodpeckers, and balmy temperatures, replaced by towering mountains,



deep snow, and wind. Lots of wind. So much do that I expected very little in the way of success. Thankfully, my fears were baseless and we were soon scoping a distant but very large flock of Rosy-Finches that included a couple of **Black** and **Gray-crowned** among the many **Brown-cappeds**. It was the first time I had seen "Rosies" on the pass in the spring, and it nice to get ahead with these sometimes hard to find birds!

Our main goal, though, was the one that would be especially hard to find in the wind. But yet again luck prevailed, and I heard the distant call of a **White-tailed Ptarmigan**. A short, but tough, walk through deep snow and we were soon nose to nose (or nose to beak?) with a male ptarmigan, easily among the top highlights of the trip!

With the ptarmigan in the bag, we descended down in to Silverthorne. Even though we had already seen the Rosies, we decided to visit some feeders to see them again. A large flock, with all three species, greeted us on arrival and we enjoyed much closer views. Then it was

time for a quick lunch, and a typically long afternoon drive to the plains town of Wray.

On arrival we had an interesting and informative meeting with the local rancher who generously allows birders onto his land to watch Greater Prairie-Chickens, and then we spend the last hour of the day scoping out the lek for the next day. A good number of **Greater Prairie-Chickens** were sitting around the lek, for the most part looking bored, but still making their way onto the lifelist of the group.



Early the next morning we were back out at the lek, and the show couldn't have been more different!
Eerily booming, cackling, and caterwauling, the signs of the dance were all around us long before we could see it. And once we could see it the show got only better! Greater Prairie-Chickens are often the most popular species of the trip, and it was easy to see why, with displays any bird-of-paradise would be proud to claim as its own. Several



Burrowing Owls and many singing **Western Meadowlarks** kept us company during the morning hours.

After the show and breakfast back in town, it was time to continue onwards. Our long drive south was most uneventful, though a few **Wild Turkeys** were the only ones of the tour, until we neared the Arkansas River Valley. Checking a few drying reservoirs, we found a few shorebirds to pad the list, including **Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitcher,** and ever popular **American Avocet**, in addition to a good variety of ducks.

Checking in to our hotel, we found ourselves with a few hours of daylight remaining. So we packed into the van again, and headed west to scour some marshes for new species. Here the early timing of the tour became apparent, and we had little luck with the hoped for Ralids, or at a spot I know for Cassin's Sparrow. Some **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** kept things from getting too boring, while a complete surprise in the form of **Black Phoebe** (very rare in this part of Colorado) added a bit of excitement.

Day 3 - Lamar to Gunnison

The main target of morning 3 is normally Lesser Prairie-Chicken. So it was that we yet again dragged ourselves out of bed in the pre-dawn and drove to a lek site. But on arrival I was somewhat horrified to see a party of researchers out on the lek, which was covered in

traps, and not a bird in sight! Some extreme bad luck on our part had us visiting the lek the same day a trapping event was going on, and we unfortunately missed the birds.

Doing our best to make lemonade out of lemons, we began our trek back westward. It didn't take us long to find a handsome

Mountain Plover, a local species that can sometimes play



hard to get. A short distance further a small flock of **McCown's Longspurs**, with a single **Chestnut-collared Longspur** took a bit of pressure of the later part of the trip (though with the Chestnut-collared not being in breeding plumage we still would target a known territory!).

Back in the Arkansas River Valley, we continued towards the mountains. But not without a stop at a few different wetlands, good sites for list padding. Our best luck came at a small fish hatchery, where we found a group of white geese with both **Ross's** and **Snow Geese** present, in addition to a **Clark's Grebe**.

A short stop just outside the city of Pueblo gave us some point-blank views of the intricately patterned **Scaled Quail**, as well as the more dour **Curve-billed Thrasher** and **Canyon Towhee**. Starting into the foothills, we lucked into a flock of **Pinyon Jays** right



along the highway, a good spot of luck given the bad weather we were to encounter in a few days... We arrived in Gunnison in good time, checked into our hotel, and then immediately drove even further west, one last target on our mind for the day.

That target is what makes the Black Canyon of the Gunnison famous among birders. Don't get me wrong, the Black Canyon is among the World's

great scenic vistas, and all of us enjoyed the view. But it was a specific bird we were looking for. And in contrast to some visits, we found it quickly – a superb male **Dusky Grouse** displaying right along the side of the road! We were privileged to watch it strut mere feet from our car, doing its best to show us its finery. A short distance further we found a female grouse for comparison, and then back at the campground nearby yet another male. It was a good end to a day that had started out a bit disappointedly.

Day 4 - Gunnison to Grand Junction

The grouse of day 4 always leaves me with mixed feelings. It is far and away the rarest species we see on the tour, in terms of global numbers. In fact, it is nearly endemic to Colorado! But it is also the one that typically provides, shall we say, less than ideal views. Even so, we were at our normal stakeout right on time (that is to say, dark and early!), and set ourselves up to watch for our quarry. Once it had gotten light enough to see the far ridge we quickly spotted a few **Gunnison Sage-Grouse** performing their rather vigorous

display. And in the end I was pleasantly surprised how much detail was actually visible on the far away birds, enough to even see their distinctive "topknot" plumes that distinguish them from their close relatives further north.

With our day's grouse in the bag, we quickly stopped to look at a couple of **Sage Thrashers** and **Mountain Bluebirds**, and we began our daily commute to the next birding site (with a quick stop to ogle some roadside Bighorn Sheep). With our previous day's luck on Dusky Grouse, we skipped a return visit to the canyon, and headed straight to the town of Delta. A few reservoirs and wetlands here make for a good spot to pad the list a bit, and we did just that at our first stop with several waterfowl species and a nice flock of **White-faced Ibis**.



After a quick lunch that included some truly delicious pie, we continued on to another wetland/reservoir. This one was absolutely chock-full of birds, with everything from displaying **Western Grebes** to noisy **Marsh Wren**, ducks galore, and even a sizable flock of **Long-billed Curlews**, not a common bird in the area by any means.

A nearby hamlet with some large trees quickly gave us the hoped for **Lewis's Woodpecker**. We began our last long drive of the day by heading towards Grand Junction, with one final stop at another reservoir. This one proved fairly quiet, though a nice flock of swallows included both **Bank** and **Cliff**. Finally making it to Grand Junction, we settled in for the night.

Day 5 - Grand Junction to Craig

The morning of day 5 dawned cool and clear, and we began our birding at the gloriously beautiful Colorado National Monument. The bird activity was a bit subdued, though, and we soon found out why as a large snowstorm moved in rather quickly. Before the snow hit we did manage some views of a **Gambel's Quail** hiding in some sage, in addition to some new birds in the pinyon-juniper woodland (such as **Rock** and **Canyon Wrens**, **Bushtit**, and

Black-throated Sparrow).

Once the snow hit we headed back to the car, and for the rest of the morning practiced targeted birding near cover. A stop by the park visitors center gave us a cooperative **Juniper Titmouse** and a somewhat less cooperative **Black-throated Gray Warbler**, but the snow was probably the reason we missed normally easy species such as White-throated Swift.

Moving out of the park and into the deserty lowlands to the west, we spent some time in the increasingly heavy snow looking for Sagebrush Sparrow. My first stakeout came up empty (but did produce large flocks of Horned Larks and Lark Sparrows along the roadside), but finally a second location produced some brief but good views of Sagebrush Sparrow. A wet looking Sage Thrasher and a Brewer's Sparrow rounded out the haul.



With the rest of the morning looking like a wash, we began our day's drive, this time to the north. We finally drove out from under the snowstorm and arrived in Craig earlier than usual. The later afternoon was spent on another back road, this time north of the town of Hayden. A couple of stately **Sandhill Cranes** posed nicely by the car before we had gotten very far, and various species of waterfowl dotted the ponds nearby. Working our way up into aspen woodland, the bird numbers slowed to a crawl. But we persevered, and eventually found our main goal of the afternoon – a smartly patterned **Red-naped Sapsucker**.

With the sapsucker under our belts and the day starting to draw to a close, we returned to Craig. On the way we flushed a flock of **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, getting a bit of a jump on the main bird of the morrow, but more and better was to come!

Day 6 - Craig to Walden

We awoke to find a nice layer of fresh snow on the ground, which thankfully did not interfere with us getting to our lek of the day. Unlike our previous locations, for this lek we were located in blinds placed right by where the birds were dancing, and what a show it was! Dozens of **Sharp-tailed Grouse** were pirouetting and cackling all around us, all on a fresh blanket of the whitest snow imaginable. I've seen the dance of Sharp-tails many times, and as always I was blown away by the show!



After the grouse antics died down, we grabbed our quick breakfast and began the drive east. The weather was nice for a change, but it was not to last – by the time we made it to Rabbit Ears Pass it began to blizzard. The snow dogged us for most of the morning and early afternoon, but thankfully lifted just long enough for us to have some very nice looks at **Barrow's Goldeneye** among the more common duck species (as well as a rare **Greater Scaup**).

Willow Creek Pass wasn't much better than Rabbit Ears, but descending into North Park finally got us out of the heaviest snow. The roads were all still blanketed in the white stuff, which made for a rather interesting avian spectacle – hundreds upon hundreds of **Horned Larks**, along with a surprisingly large number of **McCown's Longspurs** were stranded along the roads. This was bad news for the larks and longspurs, which were likely knocked out of the sky during their migration, but did make for some very good views of what can normally be rather skittish birds. What it was good news for was a gorgeous **Northern Goshawk** that spent some time chasing (but never catching that we could see) some of the roadside birds.

At the Moose Visitors Center we were treated to another snow-caused spectacle – many hundreds of Rosy-Finches, of all three species, came down from the mountains and fed

practically at arms length! At one point we had all three species on the feeder next to each other. but easily my favorite was a male **Black Rosy-Finch** that had one particular area of snow that it returned to time after time. Some Steller's Jays and a single "Slatecolored" Fox **Sparrow** rounded out the haul.



Day 7 - Walden to Denver

The last day of the tour, and the last grouse, were both about a half-hour drive from our base in Walden. It was still snowing as we arrived at the lake, but that didn't deter the birds! About 30 **Greater Sage-Grouse** showed up right on time, and gave us their typically bizarre yet spectacular morning dance. The heavy snow actually made things rather ethereal and interesting, quite unlike any other time I have visited the lek. While it didn't allow for the typically excellent photo ops, it made for perhaps a cooler all-round experience. It also was probably the reason the birds wrapped up their work about an hour early, which still gave us a nice long view but also meant we got to eat breakfast a bit earlier than usual.

All of the snowfall had me a bit worried about how we would return to Denver, but thankfully we learned that Cameron Pass was well plowed. So we drove over the mountains one last time, and descended into Fort Collins.

At this point we didn't have much left on our target list. Since some had missed the Chestnut-collared Longspur earlier on the tour we decided to head to a stakeout I knew of to see if we could rectify the situation. It didn't take us long on arrival to have some superb views of a handsome male **Chestnut-collared Longspur**, as well as a couple of more subtly patterned female birds.

With the day starting to draw to a close, I had to decide where our remaining time was best spent. Looking at the list, I chose a large marsh on the way back to Denver to try to pad our Rallid list a bit. And that turned out to be a good decision! It didn't take long to get some truly wonderful views of a **Virginia Rail** that returned to an open spot in the marsh a few times, allowing us walk away views. A nearby singing **Sora** though was less cooperative. Perseverance paid off though, and in the end we got some of the best views I've ever had of this shy species. A perfect way to end the tour!



Trip List

Bird taxonomy follows Clements, J. F., T. S. Schulenberg, M. J. Iliff, B.L. Sullivan, C. L. Wood, and D. Roberson. 2012. The eBird/Clements checklist of birds of the world: Version 6.9 (2014).

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

Snow Goose *Chen caerulescens*

Ross's Goose Chen rossii

Canada Goose Branta canadensis
Gadwall Anas strepera
American Wigeon Anas americana
Mallard Anas platyrhynchos

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Anas discors

Anas cyanoptera

Anas clypeata

Anas acuta

Anas acuta

Anas crecca

Canvasback Avthva valisineria Redhead Aythya americana Ring-necked Duck Avthva collaris **Greater Scaup** Aythya marila Lesser Scaup Aythya affinis Bufflehead Bucephala albeola Common Goldeneye Bucephala clangula Barrow's Goldeneve Bucephala islandica **Hooded Merganser** Lophodytes cucullatus Common Merganser Mergus merganser Ruddy Duck Oxyura jamaicensis

GALLIFORMES: Odontophoridae

Scaled Quail Callipepla squamata
Gambel's Quail Callipepla gambelii

GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae

Ring-necked Pheasant Phasianus colchicus

Greater Sage-Grouse
Gunnison Sage-Grouse
White-tailed Ptarmigan
Dusky Grouse
Sharp-tailed Grouse
Centrocercus urophasianus
Centrocercus minimus
Lagopus leucura
Dendragapus obscurus
Tympanuchus phasianellus

Greater Prairie-Chicken Tympanuchus cupido
Wild Turkey Meleagris gallopavo

PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae

Pied-billed Grebe Podilymbus podiceps
Eared Grebe Podiceps nigricollis

Western Grebe Aechmophorus occidentalis
Clark's Grebe Aechmophorus clarkii

SULIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae

Double-crested Cormorant Phalacrocorax auritus

PELECANIFORMES: Pelecanidae

American White Pelican Pelecanus erythrorhynchos

PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae

Great Blue Heron Ardea herodias
Great Egret Ardea alba
Snowy Egret Egretta thula

Black-crowned Night-Heron Nycticorax nycticorax

PELECANIFORMES: Threskiornithidae

White-faced Ibis Plegadis chihi

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Cathartidae

Turkey Vulture Cathartes aura

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Pandionidae

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae

Golden EagleAquila chrysaetosNorthern HarrierCircus cyaneusNorthern GoshawkAccipiter gentilis

Bald Eagle Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Swainson's Hawk Buteo swainsoni
Rough-legged Hawk Buteo lagopus
Red-tailed Hawk Buteo jamaicensis

GRUIFORMES: Rallidae

Virginia Rail Rallus limicola
Sora Porzana carolina
American Coot Fulica americana

GRUIFORMES: Gruidae

Sandhill Crane Grus canadensis

CHARADRIIFORMES: Recurvirostridae

Black-necked Stilt Himantopus mexicanus
American Avocet Recurvirostra americana

CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae

Snowy Plover Charadrius nivosus
Killdeer Charadrius vociferus
Mountain Plover Charadrius montanus

CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae

Greater Yellowlegs Tringa melanoleuca Lesser Yellowlegs Tringa flavipes

Long-billed Curlew Numenius americanus

Long-billed Dowitcher

Wilson's Snipe

CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae

Bonaparte's Gull Franklin's Gull

Ring-billed Gull California Gull

COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae

Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove

Mourning Dove

STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae

Great Horned Owl Burrowing Owl

APODIFORMES: Trochilidae

Black-chinned Hummingbird Broad-tailed Hummingbird

CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae

Belted Kingfisher

PICIFORMES: Picidae

Lewis's Woodpecker

Williamson's Sapsucker Red-naped Sapsucker Downy Woodpecker Hairy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker

FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae

American Kestrel Peregrine Falcon Prairie Falcon

PASSERIFORMES: Tyrannidae

Say's Phoebe Black Phoebe

PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae

Loggerhead Shrike

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PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae

Gray Jay Pinyon Jay

Steller's Jay

Western Scrub-Jay

Black-billed Magpie

American Crow Chihuahuan Raven Limnodromus scolopaceus

Gallinago delicata

Chroicocephalus philadelphia

Leucophaeus pipixcan Larus delawarensis Larus californicus

Columba livia

Streptopelia decaocto Zenaida macroura

Bubo virginianus Athene cunicularia

Archilochus alexandri Selasphorus platycercus

Megaceryle alcyon

Melanerpes lewis

Sphyrapicus thyroideus Sphyrapicus nuchalis Picoides pubescens Picoides villosus Colaptes auratus

Falco sparverius Falco peregrinus Falco mexicanus

Sayornis saya Sayornis nigricans

Lanius ludovicianus

Perisoreus canadensis

Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus

Cyanocitta stelleri

Aphelocoma californica

Pica hudsonia

Corvus brachyrhynchos Corvus cryptoleucus Common Raven Corvus corax

PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae

Horned Lark Eremophila alpestris

PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae

Northern Rough-winged Swallow Stelgidopteryx serripennis

Tree Swallow Tachycineta bicolor Violet-green Swallow Tachycineta thalassina

Bank Swallow Riparia riparia Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica

Cliff Swallow Petrochelidon pyrrhonota

PASSERIFORMES: Paridae

Black-capped Chickadee Poecile atricapillus Mountain Chickadee Poecile gambeli **Juniper Titmouse** Baeolophus ridgwayi

PASSERIFORMES: Aegithalidae

Bushtit Psaltriparus minimus

PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae

Red-breasted Nuthatch Sitta canadensis White-breasted Nuthatch Sitta carolinensis Pygmy Nuthatch Sitta pygmaea

PASSERIFORMES: Certhiidae

Brown Creeper Certhia americana

PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae

Rock Wren Salpinctes obsoletus Catherpes mexicanus Canvon Wren Marsh Wren Cistothorus palustris

PASSERIFORMES: Polioptilidae

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher Polioptila caerulea

PASSERIFORMES: Cinclidae

American Dipper Cinclus mexicanus

PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae

Ruby-crowned Kinglet Regulus calendula

PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae

Western Bluebird Sialia mexicana Mountain Bluebird Sialia currucoides Townsend's Solitaire Myadestes townsendi American Robin Turdus migratorius

PASSERIFORMES: Mimidae

Curve-billed Thrasher Toxostoma curvirostre Sage Thrasher Oreoscoptes montanus

Northern Mockingbird Mimus polyglottos

PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae

European Starling Sturnus vulgaris **PASSERIFORMES: Calcariidae**

Chestnut-collared Longspur Calcarius ornatus

McCown's Longspur Rhynchophanes mccownii

PASSERIFORMES: Parulidae
Black-throated Gray Warbler

Setophaga nigrescens

PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae

Spotted Towhee Pipilo maculatus Canyon Towhee Melozone fusca Chipping Sparrow Spizella passerina Brewer's Sparrow Spizella breweri Vesper Sparrow Pooecetes gramineus Lark Sparrow Chondestes grammacus Black-throated Sparrow Amphispiza bilineata Sagebrush Sparrow Artemisiospiza nevadensis

Savannah Sparrow
Passerculus sandwichensis
Grasshopper Sparrow
Ammodramus savannarum
Fox Sparrow
Passerella iliaca

Song Sparrow

Melospiza melodia

White-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*

PASSERIFORMES: Icteridae

Red-winged Blackbird Agelaius phoeniceus Western Meadowlark Sturnella neglecta

Yellow-headed Blackbird Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus

Brewer's Blackbird Euphagus cyanocephalus
Common Grackle Quiscalus quiscula
Great-tailed Grackle Quiscalus mexicanus
Brown-headed Cowbird Molothrus ater

PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch Leucosticte tephrocotis

Black Rosy-Finch Leucosticte atrata

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch

Pine Grosbeak

House Finch

Haemorhous mexicanus

Haemorhous mexicanus

Cassin's Finch Haemorhous cassinii
Red Crossbill Loxia curvirostra
Pine Siskin Spinus pinus

Evening Grosbeak *Coccothraustes vespertinus*

Spinus tristis

PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae

House Sparrow Passer domesticus

Mammal List

American Goldfinch

North American Beaver

Muskrat

Ord's Kangaroo Rat

Fox Squirre

Gunnison Prairie-Dog Black-tailed Prairie-Dog Yellow-bellied Marmot Wyoming Ground-Squirrel

Rock Squirrel Least Chipmunk Colorado Chipmunk

Eastern Cottontail Desert Cottontail Mountain Cottontail Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Coyote Pronghorn

Elk

Mule Deer Bighorn Sheep Castor canadensis Ondatra zibethicus Dipodomys ordii Sciurus niger

Cynomys gunnisoni Cynomys ludovicianus Marmota flaviventris Spermophilus elegans Spermophilus variegatus

Tamias minimus
Tamias quadrivittatus
Sylvilagus floridanus
Sylvilagus audubonii
Sylvilagus nuttallii
Lepus californicus

Canis latrans

Antilocapra americana Cervus canadensis Odocoileus hemionus Ovis canadensis