



A [Tropical Birding](#) SET DEPARTURE tour

Colorado: Chasing Chickens

12-22 April, 2019



The lively dance of dozens of Greater Prairie-Chickens was a spectacular finale to the tour.

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SUMMARY

Balanced on the precipice of spring, April in Colorado is a tumultuous time. In ten days, we crossed every corner of the state and experienced landscapes, birds and weather that would aptly fill a small country.

First tackling the rugged and impressive Rocky Mountains we encountered a **Williamson's Sapsucker**, appearing ghostlike in the eerie morning fog. Further up slope we were absolutely gob smacked by the ethereal flocks of hundreds of blushing **Black, Brown-capped** and **Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches** seeking sustenance during a late winter snowstorm. Making our way up to Walden we stopped to enjoy a lively **American Dipper**, swimming and feeding in a frigid mountain stream alongside several oblivious Fly-fisherman. On the frozen, sage dotted plains near Walden we saw the comical and spectacular display of **Greater Sage-Grouse** while the nearby steppe proved to be a rich hunting ground for **Ferruginous Hawks, Rough-legged Hawk** and **Golden Eagle**. Further west the weather threw some kinks in our plan, but we still managed to catch up with a small group of **Sharp-tailed Grouse** engaged in their manic foot-stomping dance along the roadside. We followed this exciting display with a few more lovely mountain finches – **Evening** and **Pine Grosbeaks** – before descending to the canyonlands of western Colorado.

Near the border with Utah we traversed the iconic red rock canyons of the American southwest. This decidedly more arid environment brought us an interesting mix of desert, sage, and pinyon-juniper specialties including **Sagebrush Sparrow, Pinyon Jay, Black-throated Sparrow** and the ridiculously adorned **Gambell's Quail**. Returning to the Rocky Mountains we sought out another chicken in one of the most rugged and stark settings imaginable – the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. We searched this jagged and profoundly deep gash in the landscape for fruitless hours, saved at sunset by the miracle of “one more try”. A handsome male **Dusky Grouse** nearly hopped on the roof of the van in full display, oblivious to our presence as his deep thrumming call signaled dominance to any nearby rivals.

The following dawn we gazed across the frosted plains of Gunnison as one of North America's newest and rarest birds, the **Gunnison Sage-Grouse**, displayed on a distant hillside in the company of Rocky Mountain Elk. Reaching the literal high-point of our tour we climbed over the majestic Monarch Pass where we experienced breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and **American Three-toed Woodpecker**. We quickly dropped down into the dry cholla spotted grasslands near Pueblo, at the northern terminus of the Chihuahuan Desert. A brief exploration revealed **Curve-billed Thrashers, Canyon Towhees** and most exciting of all – a gleaming silver group of **Scaled Quail**. We ended this long and varied day with a stop at a large reservoir out on the prairies of Eastern Colorado. This isolated body of water was a refuge for hundreds of migrating waders and waterfowl – **Redhead, Western Grebe, Snowy Plovers, Baird's Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope** and **American White Pelican** provided an excellent finale.

Much of the following day was spent heading east into the short-grass prairies of central Kansas. En route we came across a pair of **Mottled Ducks** at a roadside pond – one of the few records for the state of Kansas and a real surprise. Arriving in the infamous, gunslinging outpost of Dodge City we settled in for a very early start the following day. Arriving well before dawn, the expansive prairies of The Nature Conservancy's Smoky Valley Preserve were drenched in brilliant moonlight. The bright skies meant the resident **Lesser Prairie-Chickens** were already in full display – charging, cackling and capering, silhouetted in the silvery glow. As the sun rose the show continued as we all enjoyed what was perhaps the finest of the grouse displays witnessed on tour. We followed the show with a leisurely breakfast before turning back west to Colorado. Rolling across the plains we stopped to explore a few small oases of trees and water. An outlandish looking flock of **Long-billed Curlews** fed in a wet field while **Northern Cardinal, Chimney Swift** and **Brown Thrasher** provided a distinctly eastern set of birds. Arriving in Wray in the late afternoon we met with the illustrious Bob Bletsoe – a font of knowledge Bob gave us a thorough orientation of the working cattle ranch and surrounding

Sandhills that hundreds of **Greater Prairie-Chickens** call home. After touring the ranch and getting a surprise look at a pair of young **Great Horned Owls** in a broken tree we took advantage of our proximity to cattle country and visited a steakhouse in town that featured local beef on the menu.

In the pale light of dawn, the following morning we arrived for our final display site. Already alive with the odd hoots, whistles and bubbles of display, nearly three dozen **Greater Prairie Chickens** strutted boomed and sparred mere feet away. We took plenty of time to fully relish this experience. One of the great North American wildlife spectacles, the springtime displays of grouse used to be a common feature of the plains. With many species in heavy decline it was a privilege to be able to spend time in a place that felt like the prairies of centuries past – full of vibrant dance and song.

Leaving the grouse behind we scored cracking looks at our final species of quail for Colorado – a handsome male **Northern Bobwhite** giving its distinct up slurred song from a brush pile. With this last bird in the bag we bid Wray a farewell and sojourned west to one of the largest and most pristine tracts of shortgrass prairie in the state. The expansive Pawnee National Grassland is a gently rolling uniform expanse, often cloaked in snow well into May, we instead found a rolling golden plain, greening around the edges. We crisscrossed the network of roads, enjoying plentiful raptors and furtive flocks of **American Pipit** and **Horned Lark**. Failing to locate our main targets we moved to the far margins of the grassland where a distant cloud of birds caught our attention. Using the network of roads to approach closer we walked out towards a flock of hundreds of **McCown's Longspurs** with a few **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** in tow! These dapper grassland granivores were just coming into full alternate plumage and were a sight to behold whirling above the grass. Returning from the longspurs a small chunk of the golden grassland moved before us, coming to focus, a perfectly camouflaged **Mountain Plover**! With all our main targets in the bag we worked our way back to Denver, stopping along the way at a nice wetland complete **with American Bittern, Sora, Yellow-headed Blackbird** and a very cooperative **Virginia Rail**.

Our final morning, we spent looking for our only missing Colorado chicken – White-tailed Ptarmigan. However, for the second time in a row, late season snow meant their favored location was packed with avid skiers and we had to content ourselves with pristine alpine vistas. The day wasn't over yet and we decided to chase down a rare visitor to the Denver area. We quickly turned up a long-lingering **Harris' Sparrow** and spent the rest of the day leisurely enjoying the hordes of migrating waterfowl, wintering raptors and returning songbirds. Even in the short ten days since the beginning of the tour the landscape and birdscape were both dramatically changed. Most of the snow had melted and trees were rapidly budding. Bird song was more prevalent, and flocks of **Cliff, Tree** and **Violet-green Swallows** swooped low over freshly thawed ponds.

Our grand tour of Colorado had taken us to every corner of the state and through a dazzling array of habitats and bird communities. The trip brought us remarkable experiences with nearly all of Colorado's chickens, an impressive number of alpine, sagebrush and prairie specialties and impressive mammals like Moose, American Bison and Pronghorn. Furthermore, we had the opportunity to see conservation efforts across the landscape – federal wildlife refuges, private conservation groups, ranchers and landowners all working to protect the incredible leks of Colorado's game birds. The awe-inspiring dances of North America's wild gamebirds have spurred wide action that protects the nation's most endangered habitats for a whole host of species, from Pygmy Rabbit to Greater Short-horned Lizard to Mountain Plover and American Bison. Some of these lek sites have existed for hundreds of years and hopefully will be enjoyed for many more.

GALLERY



Brown-capped Rosy-finch is near-endemic to Colorado's highest peaks. A dazzling shade of pink, seeing hundreds of these birds in the lightly falling snow was an incredible way to start the trip.



Evening Grosbeaks were among the 11 stunning species of finch on this tour



Pronghorn often give birth to twins and these two yearlings were still sticking together



Sharp-tailed Grouse look decidedly less impressive when not in full display



This male Greater Sage-Grouse was giving it his all – unfortunately our group might have been the only ones he impressed.



This Canada Jay was used to winning handouts through charm and cunning, we could only offer a hearty round of praise.



Sagebrush Sparrows compliment the muted reds and greens of the landscape nicely.



This Dusky Grouse was ready to take on any challenger, including our large van!



The bold eyebrows of a Mountain Chickadee give it a stern visage – something difficult to pull off when you are a near perfect sphere of fluff.



The narrow pale bands and purple air-sacs differentiate Lesser Prairie-Chickens from their more widespread cousins.



Two male Greater Prairie-Chickens do battle out on the plains. These elaborate displays are a way to signal health and dominance while both birds still get to fly off mostly unscathed.

BIRD LIST

The taxonomy of the bird list follows eBird/Clements (available here: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/clementschecklist/download/>)

(H) indicates a species that was HEARD only.
 (G) indicates a species recorded by the GUIDE ONLY.

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>

American Wigeon	<i>Anas americana</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Mottled Duck	<i>Anas fulvigula</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>
Cinnamon Teal	<i>Anas cyanoptera</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Canvasback	<i>Aythya valisineria</i>
Redhead	<i>Aythya americana</i>
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>
Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>
Hooded Merganser	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>
GALLIFORMES: Odontophoridae	
Scaled Quail	<i>Callipepla squamata</i>
Gambel's Quail	<i>Callipepla gambelii</i>
Northern Bobwhite	<i>Colinus virginianus</i>
GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae	
Ring-necked Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>

Greater Sage-Grouse	<i>Centrocercus urophasianus</i>
Gunnison Sage-Grouse	<i>Centrocercus minimus</i>
Dusky Grouse	<i>Dendragapus obscurus</i>
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Greater Prairie-Chicken	<i>Tympanuchus cupido</i>
Lesser Prairie-Chicken	<i>Tympanuchus pallidicinctus</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae	
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>
Horned Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Eared Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>
Clark's Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus clarkii</i>
SULIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae	
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>
PELECANIFORMES: Pelecanidae	
American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae	
American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
PELECANIFORMES: Threskiornithidae	
White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>
ACCIPITRIFORMES: Cathartidae	
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
ACCIPITRIFORMES: Pandionidae	
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Swainson's Hawk	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Ferruginous Hawk	<i>Buteo regalis</i>
Rough-legged Hawk	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
GRUIFORMES: Rallidae	
Virginia Rail	<i>Rallus limicola</i>
Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>
GRUIFORMES: Gruidae	
Sandhill Crane	<i>Grus canadensis</i>
CHARADRIIFORMES: Recurvirostridae	
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>
CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae	
Snowy Plover	<i>Charadrius nivosus</i>
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Mountain Plover	<i>Charadrius montanus</i>
CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae	
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>

Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>
Baird's Sandpiper	<i>Calidris bairdii</i>
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>
Wilson's Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>
CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae	
Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>
Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae	
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Band-tailed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas fasciata</i>
Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae	
Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>
Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>
APODIFORMES: Apodidae	
Chimney Swift	<i>Chaetura pelagica</i>
White-throated Swift	<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>
APODIFORMES: Trochilidae	
Black-chinned Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus alexandri</i>
CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae	

Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>
PICIFORMES: Picidae	
Lewis's Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>
Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
Williamson's Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus thyroideus</i>
Red-naped Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus nuchalis</i>
Ladder-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides scalaris</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae	
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Tyrannidae	
Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>
Say's Phoebe	<i>Sayornis saya</i>
Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae	
Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae	
Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>
Pinyon Jay	<i>Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus</i>
Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>
Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>
Clark's Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga columbiana</i>

American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae	
Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae	
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>
Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>
Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Paridae	
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>
Mountain Chickadee	<i>Poecile gambeli</i>
Juniper Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus ridgwayi</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Aegithalidae	
Bushtit	<i>Psaltriparus minimus</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
Pygmy Nuthatch	<i>Sitta pygmaea</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Certhiidae	
Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae	
Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>
Canyon Wren	<i>Catherpes mexicanus</i>

House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>
Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>
Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Polioptilidae	
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Cinclidae	
American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae	
Golden-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus satrapa</i>
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae	
Western Bluebird	<i>Sialia mexicana</i>
Mountain Bluebird	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>
Townsend's Solitaire	<i>Myadestes townsendi</i>
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Mimidae	
Curve-billed Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma curvirostre</i>
Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>
Sage Thrasher	<i>Oreoscoptes montanus</i>
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae	
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae	
American Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Bombycillidae	
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>

PASSERIFORMES: Calcariidae	
Chestnut-collared Longspur	<i>Calcarius ornatus</i>
McCown's Longspur	<i>Rhynchophanes mccownii</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Parulidae	
Virginia's Warbler	<i>Oreothlypis virginiae</i>
Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>
Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>
Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>
Black-throated Gray Warbler	<i>Setophaga nigrescens</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae	
Green-tailed Towhee	<i>Pipilo chlorurus</i>
Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>
Canyon Towhee	<i>Melospiza fusca</i>
Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>
Clay-colored Sparrow	<i>Spizella pallida</i>
Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>
Vesper Sparrow	<i>Pooecetes gramineus</i>
Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>
Black-throated Sparrow	<i>Amphispiza bilineata</i>
Sagebrush Sparrow	<i>Artemisiospiza nevadensis</i>
Lark Bunting	<i>Calamospiza melanocorys</i>
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>
Grasshopper Sparrow	<i>Ammodramus savannarum</i>
Fox Sparrow	<i>Passerella iliaca</i>
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>
Lincoln's Sparrow	<i>Melospiza lincolnii</i>

White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>
Harris's Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia querula</i>
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Cardinalidae	
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Icteridae	
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>
Yellow-headed Blackbird	<i>Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus</i>
Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>
Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>
Great-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus mexicanus</i>
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae	
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch	<i>Leucosticte tephrocotis</i>
Black Rosy-Finch	<i>Leucosticte atrata</i>
Brown-capped Rosy-Finch	<i>Leucosticte australis</i>
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>
House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>
Cassin's Finch	<i>Haemorhous cassinii</i>
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>
Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Spinus psaltria</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae	

House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Mammals	
American Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
Gunnison Prairie-Dog	<i>Cynomys gunnisoni</i>
White-tailed Prairie-Dog	<i>Cynomys leucurus</i>
Black-tailed Prairie-Dog	<i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>
Wyoming Ground-Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus elegans</i>
Golden-mantled Gr.-Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus lateralis</i>
Thirteen-lined Gr.-Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus tridecemlineatus</i>
Rock Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus variegatus</i>
Least Chipmunk	<i>Tamias minimus</i>
Hopi Chipmunk	<i>Tamias rufus</i>
Desert Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>
Mountain Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus nuttallii</i>
Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>
Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>
American Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>
Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>
Pronghorn	<i>Antilocapra americana</i>
Elk	<i>Cervus canadensis</i>
Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>
Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>

Bighorn Sheep	<i>Ovis canadensis</i>
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