

# Colorado and Wyoming

23 May–7 June 2009

## Participants:

Raymond and Judith Barker

Alan & Betty Knight

Jonathan and Mary Seiquien

Barry and Christine Shaw



**White-tailed Ptarmigan**

**Leader:** James P. Smith

**Day 1:** The group arrived at Denver International Airport and found our vehicle waiting ensuring a speedy departure. Even so, it was inevitable that our arrival at Fort Collins would be very late. The eighty-mile journey to Fort Collins was accompanied by cloud and rain, a pretty gloomy start to the trip!

**Day 2:** The team was keen to make a start and had already scoped Common Grackle, Western Meadowlark, Eurasian Collared-dove, House Finch and Western Kingbird from the motel balcony before we assembled for breakfast! The weather had also improved. It was cool and cloudy, but thankfully the rain had cleared. At breakfast, 'notables' included American Kestrel and Double-crested Cormorant.

We headed south towards Loveland and then west to Estes Park, aiming for a full day in Rocky Mountain National Park. Western Grebes graced Loveland Lake as we drove by and Common Raven, Violet-green Swallow and a Sharp-shinned Hawk were seen along the course of the Big Thompson River. We quickly found a super American Dipper here (it turned out to be a very good tour for this species). The vehicle screeched to a halt at Estes Park for Mountain Bluebirds spotted close to the edge of town. Afterwards we entered Rocky Mountain National Park, spending the day amidst glorious scenery and noting the first Elk as soon as we entered the park! At Sheep Lakes, a 'comfort' stop found us watching Steller's Jays and American Robins before starting the long climb to Trail Ridge Road. Our main quarry was White-tailed Ptarmigan, a high elevation tundra specialist. A confiding game bird, this ptarmigan has given many a good birder the run around and at best, even the locals only expect a 30% success rate. Our first attempt didn't succeed, though we did find American Pipits, Horned Larks and White-crowned Sparrows singing from the tundra. The beauty of the scenery was stunning. On the other hand, we were genuinely 'blown away' by the extremely thin air. Even a short walk at this altitude left us gasping and clearly we had to rethink our strategy. As if to rub salt in the wound, the weather worsened and we ambled back to the vehicle in horizontal, driving snow and sleet. True to form, the mountain weather proved just how fickle it can be in the Rockies. Retreating to the warmth and comfort of Alpine Visitor seemed like a good idea, and after some hot refreshment we decided to have another go at the ptarmigan. James scoped out a couple of likely spots, and this time we met with success finding an incredibly approachable male feeding within yards of Trail Ridge Road. A White-tailed Ptarmigan on the very first full day of the tour was a terrific start to the trip with close views enjoyed by all. It would also be a tough act to follow but with continued optimism, we dropped down towards Lake Irene only to find the area still covered in two to three feet of snow! There was no chance of walking the trails so we headed back towards Trail Ridge Road immediately finding a stunning Dusky Grouse, along the edge of the road. The weather began to close in once more as we drove along Trail Ridge Road with driving snow putting pay to any chance we might have for Brown-capped Rosy-finch. As we contemplated our options another White-tailed

Ptarmigan flew across the road right in front of the vehicle! Talk about it never rains but when it does it pours! A thrilling first day in the Rockies was coming to an end as we retreated from the tundra in a blizzard. We vowed to return in search of Brown-capped Rosy-finch over a fine supper in Loveland.

**Day 3:** We began with a more determined effort to be inside Rock Mountain National Park at a reasonable hour but as we headed south towards Loveland we had little choice but to stop at a roadside gravel pit. An American White Pelican, two American Avocets, five Franklin's Gulls and six Forster's Terns could easily be viewed from the road. Nice birds indeed before breakfast! At Sheep Lakes, the meadow by the restrooms was graced by 60 American Pipits and 20 American Robins. Back on the Trail Ridge Road, we stopped at Rainbow Curve to join hordes of tourists and had fabulous close views of Clark's Nutcrackers and Grey Jays, as well as some incredibly entertaining Colorado Chipmunks and Golden-mantled Ground-squirrel but it was really the birds of the high tops that we needed. After taking another look at the male White-tailed Ptarmigan still feeding at the same patch of dwarf willow, several of us embarked on a journey toward the large granite outcrops from Rock Cut. Hampered by blizzards once again, the remainder of our party stayed close the vehicle and had a close fly-by Golden Eagle! On the scree-slopes, Yellow-bellied Marmots and Pikas could be seen foraging from the vehicle. The rosy-finch quest went well, though slow at first, several frustrating 'heards' led to Jonathan spotting a distant pair of rosy-finches on a boulder outcrop in the tundra. A few minutes later the male was on the boulders closest to us giving immaculate views and great photo opportunities. It had been a hard but worthwhile effort with our patience rewarded. Trudging back to the vehicle through knee-deep snow never felt easier after stunning views of Brown-capped Rosy-finch! The remainder of the afternoon was spent at Hidden Valley, which, though a beautiful place, was rather quiet bird-wise. The highlight was a couple of American Dippers on the river and this pretty much closed our day in the field.

**Day 4:** A cold front moved through overnight clearing the weather system that had given such a wet opening to the tour. A day dedicated to grassland birding in the Pawnee National Grasslands was on the agenda but we got off to a shaky and rather unexpected start. The hoped-for Mountain Plovers could not be found in any of the fields on the western edge of the Pawnee. The vegetation was unusually high, perhaps too high for the plovers and despite extensive searching we couldn't find them anywhere. We did find plenty of good birds however, including Swainson's Hawk, American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, three Burrowing Owls, Horned Lark, Killdeer, and numerous Black-billed Magpies. Fabulous, stark, black-and-white male Lark Buntings displayed from fence posts all across the grasslands and would be our companions for most of the day. We found several (apparently migrating) Western Wood-pewees fly-catching from fences by the track and we were blown away by the numbers of Western Kingbirds – by the end of the day we'd logged over forty! In the cool blustery conditions, singing passerines were hard to find. The vast grasslands looked verdant after a wet spring providing plenty of cover for grassland skulkers. Even so, we eventually had fantastic views of several male McCown's Longspurs close to the track. The longspurs, in resplendent breeding plumage, were amongst the major targets of the day. An enjoyable lunch break at Crow Valley Campground near Briggsdale was rather 'birdy'. American Robins were plentiful and we were delighted to find a pair attending a nest. Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Mockingbird, Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay, House Wren, Yellow Warbler and a stunning pair of Bullock's Orioles were all found during the lunch break. An improvement in the weather after lunch sent us back to the grasslands. Mountain Plover was still very much in mind but every promising bird turned out to be a Killdeer. The wind had dropped significantly however, and the air filled with the glorious sights and sounds of displaying McCown's Longspurs. As we left the protected area, a 'leader-only' Cassin's Sparrow seen briefly couldn't be coaxed back into view unfortunately but two Lark Sparrows proved rather more co-operative. The return back to Route 14 found numerous Black-tailed Prairie Dogs enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun. Amongst them, several more Burrowing Owls followed by a wonderful fly-over Ferruginous Hawk and a young Golden Eagle! As for Mountain Plover, well its name started to sound more like an expletive than anything else, they just couldn't be found anywhere despite frequent scans in 'classic' habitat. The hour was getting late and we still hadn't seen a Chestnut-collared Longspur. Once in Wyoming, Chestnut-collards would be difficult to find, so after a break for refreshments we focused on longspurs once again. Several superb Ferruginous Hawks, both light and dark morphs, were encountered close to the road. In the heart of the grasslands several 'interesting' displaying longspurs proved to be backlit McCown's, their dark appearance recalling Chestnut-collared. We'd all but given up, but as we departed we heard and then saw two stunning male Chestnut-collared Longspurs close to the western fringe of the Pawnee. One of the males put on an amazing show and this, along with a chance sighting of Black-tailed Jack Rabbit, provided a really fine end to a superb day. We drove North through Cheyenne and then North-west towards Laramie watching the thunderheads build and the landscape change to classic Wyoming. Pronghorn Antelopes graced many of the fields as we entered Laramie for a two-night stay.

**Day 5:** A fine clear start to the day following an overnight frost and a Yellow Warbler greeted us in the parking lot of the motel providing a good start. After breakfast, we headed north of Laramie toward Bosler stopping for a

roadside Sage Thrasher. The stop in turn producing a dark-morph Swainson's Hawk and numerous Cliff Swallows. Bosler itself looked a bit run down, but still provided us with Say's Phoebe, Vesper and Brewer's Sparrows and Lark Bunting. Vast grasslands lay before us as we followed Howell Road, running parallel with the Laramie River. McCown's Longspurs, Brewer's Sparrows and Spotted Ground-squirrels seemed to be everywhere with Horned Larks at many points along the dirt road. A Ferruginous Hawk (light phase) mantled prey by the road at close range, with another bird waiting patiently for the remainder of the carcass. Remarkably, a further seven Ferruginous Hawks and no less than 15 Swainson's Hawks would be recorded during the day. Drinking pools held waterfowl in several places including Northern Pintail, American Wigeon and Gadwall. Further down the road, a more substantial wetland produced American Avocet, Spotted Sandpiper and Willet, and good views of three Brown-headed Cowbirds coming into drink. The final stop by the Laramie River was especially good with Cinnamon Teal, Wilson's Phalarope, and Forster's Tern, Willet, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-headed Blackbird and a fine pair of Prairie Falcons. In the sage brush we even stumbled across a Brewer's Sparrow's nest with four eggs! The morning had yielded some excellent birding, beautiful scenery and glorious sunshine.

The afternoon's agenda found us Lake Hattie, Hutton Lake NWR and a number of roadside ponds and lakes south west of Laramie. We recorded a good selection of water birds, some new for the trip: Clark's and Eared Grebes, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, four Franklin's Gulls, California Gull, Forster's Tern and a fantastic adult Bald Eagle. A walk down to the shore of Hattie Lake seemed like a straight forward proposition, but clouds of flies kicked up from the muddy shore sent most of our group scurrying back to the parking area. It was an intense experience but the flies were non-stinging, non-biting and absolutely harmless. Braving them provided an opportunity to finally identify a mystery sandpiper, which turned out to be Spotted, and allowed us to get a bit closer to a flock 20 Red-necked Phalaropes feeding way out in the centre of the lake. As we walked back to the parking area, flocks of McCown's Longspurs lifted from the scant vegetation and others came down to drink. Back at the vehicle, a Horned Lark's nest had been found in the parking lot! It was nestled in a tiny cluster of grasses. The adults had managed to get their brood to the nestling stage without being driven over though their choice of real estate seemed a little bizarre to us. More wetland birding throughout this area produced American Avocets, Willets and a fine Caspian Tern, whilst roadside goodies included Mountain Bluebird and Brewer's Blackbird. A fine riparian area by the Laramie River provided our final stop of the day, so busy in fact, that we spent longer than intended. It was certainly worth it, however, as we found Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker, Black-capped Chickadee, American Goldfinch, Warbling Vireo, Bullock's Oriole, and had very good views of Mountain Bluebird, Grey Catbird and Least Flycatcher. White-tailed Prairie Dogs by the entrance road were our first of the trip. A pleasant, relaxing day's birding ended happily with a fine supper in Laramie.

**Day 6:** Another beautiful start to the day, mostly clear and feeling distinctly warmer. Good weather was welcome as much of the day's itinerary would involve birding at high elevation as we moved from Laramie to Rock Springs. Travelling west through the grasslands, birds included several Ferruginous Hawks and a few Horned Larks. A roadside pond near the Vee Bar Ranch produced Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Redhead, American Wigeon, Western Meadowlark, McCown's Longspur, American Avocet and Killdeer. A fine Prairie Falcon flew over and once again Pronghorn Antelopes graced the hillsides. New for the trip at this spot was Common Merganser. Leaving the grasslands behind, we climbed the lower slopes of the Medicine Bow National Forest. Stopping for a comfort break provided an opportunity to explore the nearby forest and some fine woodland birding. Two much sought-after woodpeckers, Williamson's Sapsucker and American Three-toed Woodpecker, along with Downy Woodpecker were all found. Persistence paid off with Red-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, House Wrens at a nest, two Townsend's Solitaires, Pine Siskin, Western Tanager and Warbling Vireo – quite a haul for a brief bathroom break! Continuing up the mountain road, we soon reached the snow line. The 'Snowy Range' was indeed covered in snow, so much so, it became clear there would be no chance of leaving the roadside and exploring the trails. We settled for frequent roadside stops and turned up many good birds: Golden and Bald Eagles, Hairy Woodpecker, another American Three-toed Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush, Cassin's Finch, Wilson's Warbler, Lincoln's and White-crowned Sparrows. Lunching at the summit was a joy with stunning scenery and perfectly calm weather despite the fact that thunderstorms and snow flurries rumbled around us. American Pipits, Horned Larks, Mountain Bluebirds and White-crowned Sparrows joined us at the summit. Nearby, the first of many attempts for Black-backed Woodpecker produced its close relative, American Three-toed, a pair being seen along with a few Mountain Chickadees. On the descent, with the weather closing in a little, we found a bustling flock of White-winged Crossbills and had brief looks at female Red Crossbill and two Pine Grosbeaks (leader only). We also found another pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers! The snow flurries then started in earnest, hastening our departure from the higher elevations. Every so often a woodpecker would fly across the road and every one identified was an American Three-toed! This was rather mind blowing for a bird which can be a very difficult to

see anywhere in North America, especially in the Lower 48 states, to tally nine birds in one day from the road was unprecedented. Birding was pretty much done for the day, or so we thought.

After a brief stop for refreshment, we called at Saratoga Lake and found it loaded with birds. Strikingly obvious were Snowy Egret, American White Pelican, Osprey, Canada Goose and Yellow-headed Blackbird and by digging a little deeper we also found Pied-billed Grebe, Bufflehead, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, California and Franklin's Gulls (2), Tree Swallow, and several skulking but visible Marsh Wrens – not too shabby for a brief stop at a roadside lake! From Saratoga, we drove hard to Rocks Springs stopping only for restrooms, which just happened to have a White-tailed Prairie Dog town on site!

**Day 7:** We left Rock Springs early heading north towards Farson in warm sunshine. Apart from a few Common Ravens and Black-billed Magpies, little seemed to be stirring across the vast expanses of sagebrush but all that changed once we reached Farson. Immediately we found Sandhill Cranes, Ferruginous Hawks and singing Sage Thrashers along the fringes of the local agricultural fields. Once in the Big Sandy area (Eden Reservoir and Big Sandy recreation area), the wetlands were teeming with birds: Common Loon, Eared and Western Grebes, our first Trumpeter Swan, Canada Goose (c.150), American Wigeon, Gadwall (50+), Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Cinnamon Teal (nice male), Northern Shoveler, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, our first Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, and a remarkable 150 Ruddy Ducks. The Ruddy Duck count seemed impressive, but was positively upstaged by over 200 Red-necked Phalaropes in the centre of the reservoir – all migrants bound for the Arctic summer. Two Black Terns may also have been migrating. Horned Larks, Sage Thrashers and Brewer's Sparrow flitted about the sage but our 'real' quarry was much bigger. Greater Sage-grouse is substantial in size but often elusive in vast expanses of sage. Our strategy was to drive the myriad of sandy tracks in the Big Sandy area until we found one! The mood in the vehicle was upbeat with everyone scanning hard from the vehicle and then, all of a sudden, on a grassy track close to a small ranch, four Greater Sage-grouse. A big male stood proud in the middle of the group, which we watched from close range using the vehicle as a hide. The grouse looked settled and we began to think about photographs, not so easily done from the vehicle with so many bodies to clamber over! We drove on, trying to fool the grouse into believing that we'd departed. Of course, they were way too smart and by the time we'd walked back to the site the foursome had sneaked through the sage and had almost disappeared behind the nearest ridge. Still, the 'scope views were perfectly adequate and we marvelled at the ability of this large game bird to disappear in relatively short stands of sage. Overhead, an immaculate light-morph Ferruginous Hawk instantly became Barry's bird of the trip!

We pressed on northward taking advice from a friendly local and stayed right on track for Pinedale by-passing the tarmac of Route 191 in favour of wilderness and solitude. The views were breathtaking. Nestled amongst the sage, the occasional ranch would often have meadows close by, and in the meadows we found birds. A memorable stop at 'Big Sandy' produced Cinnamon Teal, Northern Harrier, Golden Eagle (2), Sandhill Crane (6), Wilson's Phalarope, Willet, and two new shorebirds for the tour – Long-billed Curlew (8) and Wilson's Snipe. Returning to Highway 191, we began to see Osprey nests complete with birds south of Pinedale. Lunch in Pinedale was tricky affair, more so than anticipated. "Rumors" restaurant, referenced in the 2001 trip report, appeared to be just that – a rumor. Even a long established local had never heard of it and Pinedale isn't a big place! We settled for the local saloon, more than adequate for lunch, and hit the road bound for Jackson. Our final stop of the day was a picturesque valley in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. After a slow start, the birding turned out to be good with our first opportunity to see and hear Dusky Flycatchers – we ended up seeing five in total. A Beaver was entertaining us when a male Red-naped Sapsucker provided a major distraction and brought us back into birding mode. After an hour we'd notched up Mountain Bluebird, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Song Sparrow, Cassin's Finch (nice male) and two fine male Black-headed Grosbeaks. As we departed, two Western Tanagers brought the vehicle to a standstill and from here we tried for Black-backed Woodpecker once more as the habitat looked good. We found American Three-toed and Downy Woodpeckers, but sadly no Black-backed.

The journey to Jackson was short and straight forward, or it should have been until the leader spotted what he thought was a Black Bear by the Hoback River. Naturally we had to stop and investigate and after a long wait we were finally rewarded with.....a *Homo sapien* wearing dark jacket leaving the bushes and looking completely baffled as nine pairs of binoculars gazed on; well done James! If our first bear alert had the leader fooled, there was no joke concerning the standard of the Motel 6 rooms in Jackson. They'd had a serious upgrade since our last visit in 2002 and the four nights here proved to be the most enjoyable of the tour.

**Day 8:** A beautiful day dawned leaving little doubt that our first 'appointment' should be at the top of Rendezvous Mountain in the Grand Tetons. A tram provided us access to a peak of nearly 11,000 feet and from here we planned to hike the slopes for Black Rosy-finch. Reaching the summit gave us stunning views of the Teton Range with

Jackson Hole to the east and the Jediah Smith Wilderness to the west. Being at the summit, meant almost walking down-slope before reaching prime rosy-finch habitat. Betty stayed behind, concerned about the walk back up the hill in the thin air, but perfectly content to enjoy the views and whatever birds came her way. As it happened, we'd only walked 200 meters down-slope toward Cody Bowl when we heard and then saw a Black Rosy-finch not more than five meters away calling from a small spruce. It stayed in the spruce for at least five glorious minutes allowing for point-blank views and photographs. The much-anticipated strenuous hike never happened and our key bird was seen within minutes. We sat back, enjoyed the views and settled for more high elevation species including Clark's Nutcracker, American pipit, White-crowned Sparrow and a displaying Townsend's Solitaire. The 'tram' took us back to Teton Village where walking around the outlets and apartments failed to yield any active feeders dashing our hopes of close feeding hummingbirds and finches. The lack of feeders was puzzling and we could only think that the economic climate may have been to blame. The afternoon was spent walking several trails in Grand Teton National Park for woodpeckers, an exercise that turned out to be less productive than hoped. We did find Red-naped Sapsucker and yet another American Three-toed Woodpecker, but Black-backed eluded us yet again. A charming and classically approachable Grey Jay joined us on the trail but aside from Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Warbling Vireo, Western Tanager and a party of Red Crossbills, the atmosphere in the woods was rather quiet. Barry had noted and drawn our attention to two good butterflies, Hoary Comma and Western Pine Elphin. At the parking area, Unita Ground-squirrels foraged around the picnic site. An enjoyable and rewarding day was wrapped up with a fine Mexican dinner in Jackson.

**Day 9:** A big day for most of our party. Before we set sail for Yellowstone we had a little 'business' to do in Jackson finding Trumpeter Swans, Sandhill Crane, Green-tailed Towhee, Rock Wren and Northern Rough-winged Swallow, all within the city limits. The fog began to burn off and a glorious day developed. The drive north was characterized by stunning scenery, fine weather and big mammals with Bison and Elk close to the road. As we entered Yellowstone National Park, surprisingly deep snow covered everything except the road and the stark spruces. Fortunately, the main pullouts and overlooks had been cleared and our first stop at the Lewis River provided one of the main targets of the day with two pairs of Barrow's Goldeneyes for starters! Further brief stops produced Common Loon, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, a couple of inquisitive Grey Jays (Lewis Lake), four Buffleheads and a Lesser Scaup (West Thumb of Yellowstone Lake). We reached Old Faithful and the surrounding thermal geysers by lunchtime, joining the heaving mass of tourists for an hour. We continued our anti-clockwise route on the Grant loop finding American Dipper at Firehole River and American White Pelican, Cinnamon Teal, Bufflehead, Osprey, Wilson's Snipe and Clark's Nutcracker from a beautiful overlook along the Yellowstone River. In between, we shared the road (quite literally) with a huge line of Bison that brought traffic to an absolute standstill. At Lee Harvey rapids, we optimistically and very successfully tried for Harlequin Duck finding a female perched openly on a boulder in the 'white water'. Amazingly close American Dippers were also here along with about a dozen Common Mergansers with several Pink-sided Juncos in the spruces. Our final stop was somewhat enforced by a comfort stop, in reality pit toilets, by Yellowstone Lake. The views of the lake were spectacular in the low afternoon light. None of us, least of all the leader, was prepared for the goldeneye flock before us. Incredibly, of the 46 goldeneyes present only one was a Common. All the rest were Barrow's Goldeneyes, most of them males, an incredible sight! A rather long day (over 300 miles driven) ended with another fine supper at our favourite Mexican Restaurant.

**Day 10:** The day began in leisurely fashion as we headed back to the String Lake area of Grand Teton National Park. We focused on an old 'burn' area hoping for woodpeckers, with the now annoyingly aloof Black-backed Woodpecker in mind. On arrival, the area was alive with birds including Williamson's and Red-naped Sapsuckers, good views of several Hairy Woodpeckers, with Downy Woodpecker heard. Despite a great deal of effort we couldn't conjure up a Black-backed Woodpecker anywhere. We focused on the many good species present in the area including Swainson's Thrush, Mountain Bluebird, Hammond's Flycatcher, Clark's Nutcracker, Grey Jay, Tree Swallow, perched Calliope Hummingbirds and exquisite view of singing male MacGillivray's Warblers. Five American Avocets flying through the woodland were likely just commuting between feeding areas within the lakes. In the afternoon, we drove the Signal Mountain road hoping for grouse (either Dusky or Ruffed) but actually found very few birds. From the summit, we enjoyed superb views of much of the Grand Tetons, observing herds of Elk and Mule Deer in the meadows below, but sadly no bear or Moose. Three Turkey Vultures and a Hairy Woodpecker were the only birds of note until no-see-ums and thundershowers forced us back down the mountain and ultimately back to the motel for a shower and an early supper. A few stayed out late, heading back into the park to look for owls with Great Grey in mind. A Great Horned Owl perched up for a while at dusk but beyond that two 'heard-only' Common Nighthawks were all that we could muster on a damp, chilly evening.

**Day 11:** The day dawned grey, overcast and full of rain. It was actually one of the very few mornings where weather seriously affected our plans. With no short-term clearance in the forecast we decided to leave Jackson and

follow the Snake River southwest towards Idaho. After a night of rain, the Snake River was more like a raging torrent though a brief stop did turn up two Spotted Sandpipers, two Yellow Warblers and about six Western Tanagers. By 10:30 the rain began to ease off giving us an opportunity to have a look at Pallasides Reservoir on the Idaho/Wyoming State line. At the neck end of the reservoir, the willows bordering the river were alive with birds. Notables included Great Blue Heron, Grey Catbird (2), Black-headed Grosbeak and Calliope and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. With periodic heavy showers persisting, we decided to stay close to the vehicle. A more thorough exploration of the southwest (Idaho) side of the reservoir produced a fascinating selection of species including Clark's Grebe (4), Western Grebe (20), Bald Eagle (2), Prairie Falcon, Cinnamon Teal, California Gull, Cedar Waxwing, Lincoln's Sparrow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and 500+ Tree Swallows. Deep inside the spruce woodland held even more intrigue and working between the heavy showers we found Townsend's Solitaire, Red-naped Sapsucker, MacGillivray's Warbler, Pine Siskin and a relatively close feeding flock of 45 Red Crossbills. On the return drive, we pushed a Ruffed Grouse up from the side of the dirt road, which landed and started feeding in an Aspen at eye-level for everyone in the vehicle to see.

Still being a long way from Rock Springs, much of the rest of the day was dedicated to something of a 'road trip'. We crossed a fascinating array of landscapes ranging from lush meadows to mountain passes to vast sagebrush and semi-desert. Good birds along the way included five Sandhill Cranes and 12 Cedar Waxwings at Thayne and 250 plus Franklin's Gulls near Smoot. A longer stop at Salt River Pass brought us back into range for higher elevation species with Hairy Woodpecker, Clark's Nutcracker, Dusky Flycatcher, three juvenile Cassin's Finches and a female Pine Grosbeak. Travelling south, we found ourselves in lush meadows once again finding a light-morph Ferruginous Hawk and 50 plus Franklin's Gulls just north of Cokeville. A small wildlife refuge at Cokeville Meadows gave us a productive half hour with Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, Willet, American Coot and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Despite driving through some fearsome cross winds and huge thunderheads, we arrived at Rock Springs in good time for a return visit to the Chinese Restaurant that became so popular after our first visit to Rock Springs a few days earlier.

**Day 12:** The day dawned cool and grey but patchy fog burned off by the time we reached our first stop at Flaming Gorge. The Pinyon Juniper and Sagebrush habitat here held a number of key species for us. By working a couple of spots in the area, we were eventually rewarded with good views of all our target birds, including Juniper Titmouse, Grey Flycatcher, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Plumbeous Vireo and Sage Sparrow. Other species found included Bewick's Wren, Chipping and Vesper Sparrows and the first of many Green-tailed Towhees seen during the day. Continuing south, we were heading for Utah until a sudden cry of "badger" brought the vehicle screaming to a halt. Alan spotted a mammal from the vehicle at 65 mph and was convinced it was an American Badger. We promptly u-turned and went back to the spot.....Alan proclaimed "there it is". But it's camouflage was so impressive that it took most of us a while to find it. Eventually everyone had satisfactory views from the vehicle and this brilliant piece of spotting by Alan was regarded as one of the highlights of the tour!

Heading towards Utah, random stops produced Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Mountain Bluebird, Rock Wren, Violet-green Swallows, Golden Eagle and American Kestrel. Green-tailed Towhees and Sage Sparrows were plentiful throughout. The rest of the day hinged on a very optimistic attempt for Sharp-tailed Grouse at Hayden in Colorado. Again, we found ourselves troubled by thunderstorms and though the habitat looked promising, our quest failed. We did, however, have mind-blowing views of an adult Bald Eagle flying straight down the road toward our vehicle and also found the first Willow Flycatchers of the tour. After a lengthy drive (just ask Ray!) we arrived in Grand Junction, Colorado in time for supper at a local family restaurant.

**Day 13:** A distinct change in the air. It was warm and sunny though a little breezy, the atmosphere distinctly desert-like. We began at Colorado National Monument, a journey interrupted by a female Gambel's Quail crossing the road with about a dozen tiny chicks! Once inside the monument, we enjoyed spectacular scenery and a walk down the Serpent's Trail. Surprisingly, all the parking areas inside the park had been full until we reached this particular trailhead. We did, however, have a very productive hour with Black-chinned Hummingbird, Black-throated Grey Warbler, Bushtit (5+), White-throated Swift, Rock Wren and a family of Canyon Wrens. A rare view of a perched Violet-green Swallow was surely one of the most beautiful birds of the trip. Grey Vireo was one of our targets here and was heard singing by the leader but unfortunately wasn't seen by the group. As we approached late morning, the heat of the day began to impact on our birding as did the number of tourists and locals entering the monument. We drove southeast towards Gunnison, stopping for lunch at Montrose. Given the early date of this year's tour, we'd already reached a group consensus to skip Box Canyon Falls at Ouray for the Black Swifts. Typically, the swifts don't arrive until mid June and though it would have been nice to see the falls, the one hundred mile diversion didn't seem like a worthwhile proposition on top of the drive to Gunnison. On reaching the Gunnison area, the first stop was at Blue Mesa, which held two Eared (Black-necked) Grebes, and six Common

Mergansers. The sage habitat near the shore was more interesting with Mountain Bluebird, Cliff Swallow, Western Meadowlark, a female Yellow-headed Blackbird and a Sage Thrasher carrying food to its nest. Our main quarry, however, was Gunnison Sage-grouse, endemic to the Gunnison basin. Previous tours had found them without too much difficulty southwest of Gunnison town but on entering the habitat, it became rather clear that changes had been taking place. Developers were moving in, clearing Aspen groves, widening roads and marking plots for future housing. We drove as deep into the hills as we reasonably could, checking all the sage and meadows that we passed. We even hiked one valley in the hopes that we might flush one or two grouse, but it was not our day. We found a Green-winged Teal on a small pond and Brewer's and Vesper Sparrows in the sage – nice birds but rather hollow after dipping on the sage grouse. Moreover, we were faced with a three-hour journey back to Grand Junction, providing a tough end to a tough day!

**Day 14:** A warm breeze greeted us as we loaded up the vehicle for the 300-mile drive to Denver. Having seen all of our possible high elevation species, the highlight being White-tailed Ptarmigan, we chose to skip the detour to Mount Evans on the way to Denver. Instead, we made the most of our time in the Grand Junction area and birded the foothills of the Grand Mesa in the morning. This proved to be a fine decision with four hours of very rewarding roadside birding before we headed east. The first stop provided excellent views of Say's Phoebe and Gambel's Quail, with a Bullock's Oriole in song. Climbing slightly higher, we found Ash-throated Flycatcher, Lazuli Bunting, Lark Sparrow, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Western Scrub-jay and Purple Finch. A fourth, more prolonged, stop was the most productive with a Western Screech-owl calling repeatedly in the middle of the morning and glimpsed by both Barry and Betty as it dropped down into a narrow gully. Other birds in this spot included Black-billed Magpie, a singing Cassin's Vireo, Bullock's Oriole, Spotted Towhee, and another Lazuli Bunting. We lunched well inside the Pinyon-Juniper belt of the Grand Mesa, high enough to see Steller's Jay, Black-headed Grosbeak and a calling Juniper Titmouse. One last try for Pinyon Jay, this time at Unaweep Canyon was unsuccessful so we headed East toward Denver stopping only for refreshments and a comfort stop. The latter just happened to be at a high elevation pass on Interstate 70 and within the Arapaho National Forest where we found three Cassin's Finch and a White-crowned Sparrow close to the restrooms. Shortly afterwards, we entered the sprawl of Denver, found our motel and celebrated the end of the tour with a visit to the Outback Steakhouse!

**Day 15:** Being deep inside Denver, we opted for a leisurely start, settling for a lay-in and a relaxed brunch. Nevertheless, it certainly wasn't a birdless morning and we notched up Double-crested Cormorants, Burrowing Owls and Western Kingbirds on the drive into Denver International Airport. It had been yet another most enjoyable Birdfinders tour with 172 bird and 27 mammal species recorded and 2,900 miles driven, almost all of it in majestic scenery. Grateful thanks to all of this year's participants for making the tour so enjoyable.

## James P Smith

### MAMMALS

American Badger  
 American Beaver  
 Coyote  
 Red Fox  
 Yellow-bellied Marmot  
 Black-tailed Prairie Dog  
 White-tailed Prairie Dog  
 Rock Squirrel  
 Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel  
 Spotted Ground Squirrel  
 Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel  
 Colorado Chipmunk  
 American Red Squirrel  
 Eastern Cottontail

Mountain Cottontail  
 Pika  
 Elk  
 Black-tailed Mule Deer  
 White-tailed Deer  
 Pronghorn Antelope  
 American Bison  
 Least Chipmunk  
 Musk Rat  
 Uinta Ground Squirrel  
 Tassel-eared Squirrel  
 Fox Squirrel  
 Black-tailed Jack Rabbit

### BUTTERFLIES

Anise Swallowtail  
 Western Tiger Swallowtail  
 Pale Swallowtail  
 Spring Azure  
 Common Ringlet  
 Painted Lady  
 Hoary Comma  
 Mourning Cloak (Camberwell Beauty)  
 Clouded Sulphur  
 Stella Orange-Tip