

# Colorado Grouse

5–15 April 2012

## Participants

Jim Brettell

Peter Greaves

David and Kim Preece

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Leaders Vaughan and Svetlana Ashby



**Lesser Prairie-chicken**

**Day 1:** Flight from London to Denver Colorado via Chicago arriving mid afternoon. After picking up our spacious minibus, the first birds we saw and heard were Killdeers and Western Meadowlarks, which dominated the prairie sounds. The traffic was quite bad despite being in the middle of nowhere and we were glad to turn off onto minor roads for our first birding stop at Barr Lake State Park. Unfortunately, the wind by now had reached near gale force making birding almost impossible so we decided to drive on towards Evans, our first destination. En route, we saw our first of many American Robins, Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles, a few Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels, a couple of Swainson's Hawks and a single Lark Bunting. We made a brief roadside stop at a lake where we added more common species including Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Canada Goose, Mallard and Ring-necked Duck. Prairie Dogs were everywhere, guarding their youngsters and confirming that we were now in North America but less common were Thirteen-lined Ground-squirrels. As we were unloading our luggage, Northern (Red-shafted) Flickers arrived in the tall bushy tree next to us whilst Morning Doves, Eurasian Collared-doves and Common Starlings were common around the motel as they proved to be throughout the tour. In fact, Common Starlings proved to be disconcertingly common with big flocks seen everywhere.

**Day 2:** After an early breakfast at McDonald's, we headed north to explore the Pawnee National Grasslands looking for our first target species, Mountain Plover. It supposed to be hard work to check mile after mile of vast grasslands but we had a few pairs of falcon's eyes in our van! To complicate our mission, dozens of Horned Larks of local *praticola* race and Western Meadowlarks were scattered higgledy-piggledy around. It was 08.30 when Peter spotted something that was "not a lark!". We stopped and there they were, a superb pair of Mountain Plovers feeding about 100m away from the road! Based on the leaders past experience, it was much easier than we expected. As we enjoying the plovers, a small herd of Pronghorns were passed peacefully grazing, completing the picture of a true prairie. Now we started the search for other prairie specialties, McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs. We had moved off the tarmac roads to the gravel roads and eventually onto dirt tracks and were relieved to find them in good condition. We stopped for the first McCown's Longspurs and followed them for closer views but strong winds seemed to be always taking them away from us. Finally, everyone got a good view of McCown's, but Chestnut-collared proved more elusive. We passed a large group of students researching the history of the prairies and found more McCown's Longspurs feeding by the side of the track. Finally, we found Chestnut-collared Longspurs and enjoyed good views including a male displaying not far from the track. We were keeping our eyes open for Ferruginous Hawk and finally by checking through the commoner Red-tailed Hawks were rewarded with views of a single bird. We also saw an uncommon dark morph Red-tailed Hawk. Returning towards Evans, we stopped at a roadside lake but it was very windy and there were no waterfowl on it although both Black-

capped Chickadee and Black-billed Magpie were new. Crossing the South Platte River, we saw the symbol of America sitting on an island, an adult Bald Eagle. Driving further, we stopped at Lower Lenthem Reservoir, where access proved to be difficult. We saw distant Eared and Western Grebes, a big flock of American White Pelicans and a Peregrine Falcon. A Northern Harrier regular appeared over the reeds, flushing hundreds of Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbird together with Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Mallard and Northern Shoveler. Ring-billed and California Gulls were everywhere and Cliff Swallows hunted low over the ditches to keep out of the wind.

**Day 3:** After breakfast, we returned to Lower Latham Reservoir but didn't linger long. White-crowned Sparrow was new for our list on the east side of the reservoir by the side of the road and we eventually found a small track heading almost to the lake shore giving us much better views of the grebes and American White Pelicans. Heading east on a maze of small country roads, we stopped at a pond by a farmstead which held an amazing number of birds including American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Cinnamon Teal, Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Greater Yellowlegs, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt and Wilson's Snipe. We then headed east to Fort Morgan to Canfield Park only to find it closed and locked! Not deterred, we headed to Dodd Bridge State Wildfowl Area and were pleased to find a pleasant car park to eat our lunch alongside the East Platte River accompanied by the calls of an unseen Eastern Phoebe. Because of the drought conditions in this part of the US, the water level in the river was low and many of the adjacent ponds and streams were dry. Walking along the river bank, we spotted a huge raptor perched on top of a dead tree, it was an immature Bald Eagle which took off and circled over our heads giving wonderful views. An adult then appeared; probably one of the parents as they were calling to each other in flight. A Belted Kingfisher flew across the river and number of White-crowned Sparrows of various plumages were scattered through the bushes and trees together with Downy Woodpecker and a few Northern Flickers. On the way back, we saw pair of Song Sparrow, one of which was constantly singing to proclaim his territory. Continuing our drive east, six adult Franklin's Gulls in full breeding plumage flew across the road near Yuma, showing their beautiful pinkish breasts. After checking into our motel in Wray, we headed north out of town for our appointment with a ranch owner. As we waited in the car park of the office opposite the ranch, we were amazed at the sheer number of cattle in the stock pens. Our host was slightly late but he had a good excuse, some of his cattle had escaped! We were invited into the office and Bob gave us an extremely informative talk about both the ranch and the status of Greater Prairie-chickens on his land. Following a hard winter a few years back numbers had crashed but over the past couple of years they had recovered and there were now thought to be around 2,000 birds on his land. Hunting permits were still issued but only two had been shot over the past couple of years as they were so elusive! We were then taken onto to his land, across vast open prairies with just the occasional gate to shut until we reached the viewing area where we were surprised to see two cars already parked. As we approached we could see few birds displaying but were mortified when Bob jumped out of his vehicle and they all flew off. Bob said with confidence that they would all come back in a few minutes and took us onto the 'stomping grounds' and showed us a few feathers. He then said he had to leave and for us to close the gates behind us and that we could also use the empty cars to view from. Apparently, Bob had talked a local garage into leaving two of their cars next to the lek for a couple of months to accustom the birds to vehicles! After a few anxious minutes wait, they did indeed come back, Bob certainly knew his birds! We then enjoyed an incredible and unforgettable display with males displaying and the occasional female coming in to have a look. The sound the males made were both evocative and surreal. There were a total of 18 Greater Prairie-chickens on the lek including females and they gave us a great show. With dusk approaching, we headed away with Peter closing all the gates as well as fending the cows off! We arrived back in town in the dark and after a quick wash and change headed to an amazing restaurant which Bob had recommended and anyone other than locals wouldn't have known how to find!

**Day 4:** Well before first light, we headed out to the lek site again with Peter doing the honours of closing the gates again. We settled down between the three (cold!) vehicles with expectations of another spectacular show, this time in morning light now. The ground was frosty and we started to hear calls even before we were able to see where they were coming from. Around 05.40, the light was good enough to see the birds displaying and for the next hour we were enthralled by one of the most spectacular bird shows on earth. Distances from the birds varied from around 40–100 metres so the views were amazing and towards the end of the show when the light had improved photographic opportunities were excellent. By 07.00, the birds had gone quiet and most left the lek so we headed back into town for a well-earned breakfast. On the return journey we saw Brown-headed Cowbird and few Ring-necked Pheasant and Peter once again valiantly risked the herds of inquisitive cows to close the gates. After breakfast and packing up, we headed south for the long journey to our next lek. Turkey Vultures, Blue Jays and a

Great-tailed Grackle were seen in town and five Wild Turkeys gave brief views in some bushes on the edge of town. We followed them into a builder's yard and enjoyed excellent close views. The journey south was through fairly featureless land, prairie long given over to mono culture. We stopped for Vesper Sparrows perched on the barbed wire fences along the road to break the journey before we arrived at the Bonny State Recreation Area where we spotted Eastern Bluebird and Eastern Phoebe on the same tree. A drive along the northern entrance track proved rather birdless but the southern entrance track was far more productive with close looks at both Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers and a not so obliging Red-bellied Woodpecker. Continuing on we eventually reached the main reservoir which was almost dry. Scanning from the visitors centre we decided that the dam would be the best viewpoint and despite the 'No Parking' sign we decided to risk it as there was no-one about. By carefully scanning, we added quite a few new birds with 27 Sandhill Cranes, Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls, Baird's Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher and amazingly a real rarity, a Ruff! As we were walking back along the dam to our vehicle, a Raccoon suddenly appeared from nowhere, doing his own things and not paying any attention to us. Resuming our long journey south, we saw few Chihuahuan Ravens around Cheyenne Wells and had a good look at two Ferruginous Hawk. By the time we reached Lamar, it was very hot but we still had daylight left so after checking into our motel (with Lesser Goldfinches House Finches in the garden), we went for a short walk to a nearby park. Northern Cardinal was new together with few individuals of both races of Yellow-rumped Warbler (Audubon's and Myrtle) but the real surprise was Golden-crowned Sparrow, which was out seriously out of range. Photographs were taken for the state rarities committee!

**Day 5:** Today we had even earlier morning start, as it was about hours to drive to the location where we were to be picked up in a Yellow School bus by Fred, an ex rodeo rider! We headed off with several other people on board firstly along paved roads then off road close to the Kansas border arriving in total darkness. We quietly opened the windows and waited for dawn. It was very cold and there was a fog rolling in and out but still in complete darkness we started to hear the first sounds comforting us that the birds were present! As first light arrived the fog began to thicken dampening our hopes. Half an hour later the visibility improved a bit and there they were, around 19 males displaying and battling on the Lesser Prairie-chicken lek. It was another unforgettable show, though birds were much further away than on the Greater Prairie-chicken lek, it was still very impressive and we watched them for the next hour as light gradually improved. In good spirits, we started the return journey, picked up our van and then went on to Fred's ranch where breakfast had been pre-ordered. Two Great Horned Owls were waiting for us in the tall trees near the ranch delaying breakfast slightly however. After breakfast, which was filling and very traditional, we returned to our hotel and started out on the long journey to Gunnison. Driving along, we added Burrowing Owl, Loggerhead Shrike and a lone Snow Goose in a pond by the side of the road to our lists. Eventually reaching Pueblo West, we had our lunch outside McDonald's enjoying the warm sunshine for a change. We were looking for Scaled Quail in the area as we had undergone a complete change of habitat and immediately as we arrived in the car park near the lake, we saw three. Unfortunately they were not tame and quickly disappeared into some scrub. On the lake we found Canvasback and a few American Coot but we wanted better views of the quail so we drove into a new estate finding Say's Phoebe and Curved-billed Thrasher for our efforts. The Curve-billed Thrasher preened on the bush just few meters away from our car. Finally, after driving to the golf course we got a close look at the pair of gorgeous Scaled Quail sitting out in the open. Continuing our journey west along the Arkansas River valley, we spotted a pair of Common Mergansers and stopped for closer looks as they were both in striking plumage in the wonderful afternoon light. We eventually arrived at the Gunnison Sage-grouse lek in the late afternoon and spent an hour scanning the valley and slopes of the nearby hills, as birds could be anywhere. No sign of the grouse however, just the electric blue of a Mountain Bluebird preparing to nest in the area and a Sage Thrasher.

**Day 6:** 4.30 in the morning found us at the Gunnison Sage-grouse lek again huddled up against the cold in our van. At first light, a few of us noticed movement through the grass in the distance. It was a Gunnison Sage-grouse but not everyone got on it before it disappeared. As we sat quietly waiting for better light to have better views, suddenly a Coyote appeared from the shadow of the hill heading directly to the area where we had seen the bird. Next moment a bird flew and we never saw anything after that. After heading back to town for breakfast, we explored hill after hill in prime Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat but sadly, couldn't find any. With a long drive ahead, we headed around the Black Canyon of Gunnison enjoying spectacular views. At the dam, we enjoyed excellent close-up views of a male Mountain Bluebird. Continuing on along spectacularly winding roads, we made a brief stop at an overlook close views of a Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker and Western Scrub-jays of the interior race. We also identified the marmots we were regularly seeing as Yellow-bellied Marmot and the small chipmunk were

Colorado Chipmunks. Continuing our long journey around the Gunnison National Forest, Mountain Bluebirds and American Robins brightened up the gloomy weather. A short break in Carbondale to 'gas up' and buy some snacks was welcome but less so was the surprise fact that the shorter route from Gunnison was open due to lack of snow but had not be advertised as clear! Eventually, reaching Glenwood Springs, we turned east again along a rather depressing valley full of the evidence of coal mining. It was therefore a relief when we turned north again and started heading through much more attractive scenery. Eventually, after a long drive, we arrived in the ski resort of Steamboat springs, our base for the next three nights.

**Day 7:** Fortunately, we didn't have to get up as early today as the lek of our next 'game' bird was right by the side of a road not too far away. As with the other grouse however, we parked carefully and sat quietly in the van for the action to start. It was bitterly cold, enough to make your eyes water, but it wasn't long before we spotted the first Sharp-tailed Grouse head peering out of the long grass, then a second and third. Suddenly, one bird jumped up in the air, then – another! It was a wonderful display, completely different to the lekking of the grouse we had already seen and we stayed by the side of the road and enjoyed the show for around an hour. A Spotted Towhee sang from the top of the bush behind us and a Sharp-shinned Hawk glided over the bushes adding further interest. Suddenly, the grouse starting flying away one after another and within a minute they had all gone! We counted total of 14 birds. Heading to the nearby town, we tried in vain to find somewhere for breakfast but everywhere was closed! Fortunately, the only gas station in town sold coffee, muffins and pies so all was not lost! Heading out of town, we started the search for our next target grouse. Having seen the species in Arizona and its sister species in California the habitat didn't look hopeful. A singing male Spotted Towhee, a beautiful male Northern Harrier quartering the hillsides and Sandhill Cranes held our interest as the temperature dramatically soared giving a real feel of summer but no Dusky Grouse! Retracing our route over a small wooded pass everyone was keeping eye open for movement when Jim suddenly shouted: "stop, grouse under the bushes!" We reversed and everyone had a good view of a wonderful male Dusky Grouse before it crept away from the road. Quietly getting out, we watched it slowly walk away. Following it into the bushes, we found it quietly feeding before sitting down and relying on its camouflage to hide from us. We found a good position to watch it and carefully stalked around the bushes for better photographs but the bird wasn't perturbed by our presence so we eventually left it in peace. Returning back through Steamboat Springs, we crossed over the continental divide at Rabbit Ears Pass (9,426 feet) and drove northeast through Walden, enjoyed the spectacular sight of a huge female Golden Eagle sat on a roadside fence post, until we reached the Moose Visitor Centre in the Colorado National Forest. On the feeders at this near deserted centre were hundreds of Red-winged Blackbirds but more importantly there were other special birds. During the course of the next hour we enjoyed excellent views of Pine Grosbeaks, Cassin's Finches, a single White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed (Grey-headed) Juncos and Grey and Steller's Jays. We were hoping to see rosy-finches but because of the very early, warm spring, there was little snow in mountains and the rosy-finches had moved back up slope to their preferred feeding grounds. Heading back towards Walden, we enjoyed prolonged views of a Rough-legged Buzzard before reaching the Greater Sage-grouse lek which we were checking out for the morning. No sign of any birds as we scanned the area but something to look forward to tomorrow!

**Day 8:** Confused by the sodium lighting outside our motel, one of us thought that it had been snowing in the night! And so it was after a moderately early start and a drive of less than hour, we were back in place on the lek as it was just getting light. There was no sign of any birds present and the front seat passenger was just about to open the door and get out when Kim called as loud as she dared that there was a bird stood in the sage just next to car! It is hard to imagine that we hadn't noticed it as this huge male Greater Sage-grouse was only about 20–30 metres from the van but she had undoubtedly prevented us from accidentally flushing it! This took us completely by surprise as it was still virtually dark; we hadn't expected any of the grouse to be in the bushes but in the open area in front of us and it was so well camouflaged despite its size. In fact, when it turned away and you couldn't see the white on the chest it was still difficult to believe that it was there. After a few minutes and with a little more light we counted a total of five wonderful males which and soon started displaying and fighting. It wasn't a very prolonged lek however, but nevertheless, we still enjoyed watching them as they fluffed up their feather and inflated their pouches to impress their rivals and hopefully attract females. The light was improving and we were hoping to watch these wonderful birds in sunlight but suddenly, they all took off one by one and within a minute they had all gone! Driving back to Steamboat Springs, we tried to take a short cut through the mountains, but snow blocked our way and we had to return to main road. After lunch, we visited the house of an elderly couple on the outskirts of town where we were invited in to see birds around their feeders. It started raining and we were very happy to enjoy the hospitality in their warm house. Birds were singing and calling from the trees all around their house and it was

very impressive to see dozens of Evening Grosbeaks (total around area roughly about 200 birds!), Cassin's Finches and Pine Siskins, a single resplendent male American Goldfinch and Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees on the feeders at any one time. During short walk around the area, we also added wonderful close views of Red-naped Sapsucker and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Then we drove towards Steamboat Lake to check known feeders for Rosy-finches but the weather deteriorated, rain turned into snow and the wind increased. The selection of bird species here were similar to that on the other feeders, but birds were shy and not in the same impressive number and sadly, there was no sign of any Rosy-finches.

**Day 9:** This morning we didn't imagine snow, it had been falling heavily all night! We headed out of town over the Rabbit Ears Pass again and this time rather than being scenic, it was a driving experience, covered with snow and ice. It was passable with care however and after an hour of cautiously climbing up over the pass and descending the other side (trying not to get in the way of large trucks with snow chains!) we were out of it. Breakfast was ordered in Kremmling at the famous Moose Café, which is situated overlooking the cliffs where Prairie Falcons breed. As we were waiting for our orders to arrive, Jim spotted a Prairie Falcon sitting on the edge of the cliff so we all 'piled out' to see it. Later, we also saw it in flight. Heading further on, we stopped by the bridge across Blue River where Dave spotted an American Dipper. It promptly disappeared however but later we found a pair back at the same spot. Nearby, on top of a spruce tree, a Red-breasted Nuthatch was struggling to keep balance in the wind. Continuing our journey, several Osprey nests were seen on roadside telegraph poles and on one of them, a pair were in residence. After last night's bad weather and following a lead, we were hoping that it might push rosy-finches down to feeders around the town of Silverthorne. Finding Silverthorne was easy as was finding a gas station to buy lunch but finding the road was proving near impossible. Nobody had ever heard of it and there were so many new housing estates we could understand why! Eventually, a laundry delivery man came to our assistance and we found it. The lead was correct, there were dozens of Brown-capped Rosy-finches on feeders on two houses, in the trees and on the roofs coming and going all the time. There were also many birds we had seen before including Grey Jay, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins but new for us were Clark's Nutcracker and Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches. We didn't any other rosy-finch species but were just grateful we had found one given the lack of hard weather. Now we had just one more target bird; White-tailed Ptarmigan. The drive up over Loveland Pass was spectacular but oh was the wind cold when we got to the top! We expected to have to work very hard for this bird, finding a white bird on white snow is a challenge and many birders are unsuccessful but not for our team! Once again we were at the Continental Divide, this time at an altitude of 11960 ft and breathing was difficult. The slopes were all covered with snow with only few bare brown patches occupied by a few American Pipits and amazingly, a Western Meadowlark. We then went to check another area and it doesn't take long for Kim to spot the birds! There they were two White-tailed Ptarmigans in the snow around 500 metres away. We enjoyed watching them for a while then decided to walk closer for better views. Easier said than done through the snow but gradually we got closer until we were around 50 metres away. Amazingly, they then started to feed and walk directly towards us totally unperturbed by our presence until they were only around 20 metres away. They then decided to bury their selves into the snow in front of us so we left them in peace. Driving further, we stopped to have a look at Big Horned Sheep – wild sheep feeding on the slope opposite the view point about 400m away. As we neared Denver, we turned into Red Rock Park, where we saw about 20 White-throated Swifts, Canyon Wren and Peregrine, perched on a Rock. It was also nice to see Western Scrub-jay and Steller's Jay again. We didn't spend long in this beautiful area formed of huge red boulders as by now it was starting to get dark, so we headed through the city to our motel to check in and go for our last group dinner.

**Day 10:** After relaxed breakfast, we went to airport to check in for our overnight flight back to London via Dallas whilst Peter headed back to South Africa and Paula a long drive home to California.

**Day 11:** Arrival back in the UK.

## MAMMALS

1. Yellow-bellied Marmot	<i>Marmota flaviventris</i>
2. Black-tailed Prairie Dog	<i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>
3. White-tailed Prairie Dog	<i>Cynomys leucurus</i>
4. Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus tridecemlineatus</i>
5. Least Chipmunk	<i>Tamias minimus</i>
6. Colorado Chipmunk	<i>Tamias quadrivittatus</i>
7. Eastern Gray Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
8. Desert Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>
9. Mountain Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus nuttallii</i>
10. Eastern Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>
11. White-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus townsendii</i>
12. Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>
13. White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
14. Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>
15. Elk	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
16. Pronghorn	<i>Antilocapra Americana</i>
17. Bighorn Sheep	<i>Ovis canadensis</i>
18. Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>
19. Northern Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>